

Bridging the Gap

SAVE THE CHILDREN'S

*Transitional Housing
Project* after the
Tsunami in Ampara
district, Sri Lanka



Save the Children

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The vision

Save the Children works for:

- a world which respects and values each child
- world which listens to children and learns
- world where all children have hope and opportunity

The mission

Save the Children fights for children's rights.

We deliver immediate and lasting improvements to children's lives worldwide.

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Preface

There is an intimate link between the physical environments that children occupy and the quality of their lives. Their housing, the water they drink; the air they breathe, the traffic on their streets and the quality of their schools and neighbourhoods all have impacts on their health, happiness and long term development.

In emergencies, the physical living conditions affecting children are neither healthy nor supportive. But in relation to the protection of children in emergencies, the physical environment is often overlooked. We tend to think in terms of family separation, child soldiers and sexual exploitation and abuse of children - and some of the most blatant violations of children's rights are in these areas. But in a global context, probably the most pervasive violations of children's rights have to do with their living environments.

Interventions such as identifying places where younger children can play, where adolescent girls and boys can have a social life of their own, may be key in reducing the stress levels of children. This would further provide them with the opportunity for the kinds of social interaction that can encourage their resilience and positive development. In the tsunami response Save the Children was quick in establishing these kinds of "safe havens" for children.

But this is not enough. It is crucial to address the wider physical environment around children in order to provide long term stability and security for children in emergency situations. Children and their families are being deprived of a home, sometimes of any kind of privacy. Health can be at stake due to damaged or destroyed water and sanitation systems. School facilities may have been destroyed or are used for other purposes than education. Conflict or threats of further earthquakes or floods limit the opportunities to move around. Possibilities to play indoors as well as outdoors are restricted.

The tsunami response has tended to involve the delivery of shelter units with little attention to the implications of housing reconstruction for social reconstruction and community building and with little understanding of the ways children can be affected. The result is solutions that are frequently out of touch with people's real needs, undermining families coping mechanisms and seriously affecting children's health, safety and emotional security.

Instead, the reconstruction of housing and neighbourhoods in the tsunami response must build on processes that strengthen the capacity of communities to regain control of their own lives with a focus on the present and future wellbeing of their children. This must involve the active participation of children in identifying issues and solutions in their local living environment.

Through its support Save the Children implemented tsunami response programmes in Asia, Save the Children Sweden has been looking for practical openings to further its learning in the area of programming related to children's living conditions. This has been done through introducing the concept of physical environment and how it affects children and the importance of housing and neighbourhoods for the protection of children in emergencies; and by identifying and building on relevant efforts by Save the Children programmes in Thailand, Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka.

In this context Save the Children Sweden offered to provide technical and financial support for the documentation of the shelter construction process in Ampara, paying particular attention to the community consultations that were part of this process and including a discussion on the impact of the process for children and their families.

This documentation is an important contribution to the development of Save the Children's understanding of and expertise on the impact of the immediate living environment on the protection and care of children in emergencies and the importance of involving children and their families as experts on their own needs and local reality in a reconstruction process.

I would like to thank Prasant Naik for supporting the idea of a documentation of the construction process in Ampara. I would also like to thank all staff of Save the Children in Sri Lanka offices in Colombo and Ampara who made it possible for Sheridan Bartlett to visit the different communities in the district and to meet with adults and children, representatives of Save the Children in Sri Lanka partners and other key actors involved in the shelter construction work in Sri Lanka.

I would like to thank Ravi Karkara for his support in strengthening Save the Children's competence in dealing with issues that relate to children's physical environment in South Asia and for making it possible to print this documentation for wider dissemination. I would also like to thank Neha Bhandari for whom this printing involved additional work to her already heavy work load.

Gabriella Olofsson

Advisor Children's Physical Environment

Save the Children Sweden

Acknowledgement

It is with a great deal of satisfaction that we (Save the Children in Sri Lanka - Ampara Team) write this acknowledgement, having successfully built and handed over 523 transitional shelters to the tsunami affected persons that lost their houses from seven Divisional Secretariat Divisions in Ampara district. These shelters were built to accommodate those people that lived within a 200 metre buffer zone in the coastal area.

We also take this opportunity to express our sincere thanks to Save the Children in Sri Lanka's Colombo office, Save the Children UK, DEC, other Save the Children offices and stakeholders for giving all necessary support to make the shelter scheme in the Ampara district a great success.

There were more than 30 INGOs and local NGOs involved in building transitional shelters in Ampara district in 2005.

We especially recognize UNHCR in Ampara for providing technical advice to the shelter agencies during the construction of the shelters. We are reminded that UNHCR-Ampara office mentioned at the opening of Save the Children's first 100 transitional shelters that Save the Children in Sri Lanka's transitional shelters were the best shelters developed in Ampara District.

The design of the shelter was discussed with and accepted by the beneficiaries before starting the construction work. Separate discussions were held with local partners, contractors and beneficiaries in order to get their opinions on all aspects. Their useful ideas and suggestions were seriously considered during the construction of the shelters.

Save the Children in Sri Lanka's shelters provide thermal comfort, fresh air, protection from the climate and also maintains the SPHERE standards.

And it is our fervent desire that the hopes and aspirations of the tsunami affected people will be fully met.

We would also like to add, though this report was written in early 2006, for a range of administrative reasons it has been impossible to publish until now. Save the Children recognizes, of course, that much has transpired in the meantime in Ampara which is not reflected here. However, we are confident that the findings of this report remain relevant for our post disaster responses.

Ampara Team

Save the Children in Sri Lanka

Acronyms and Abbreviations

CBOs	Community Based Organisations
HIV	Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
SLA	Sri Lankan Army
TAFREN	Task Force to Rebuild the Nation
TAP	Transitional Accommodation Project
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees

Introduction

This report documents the housing process that Save the Children and its partners developed in the district of Ampara, Sri Lanka after the tsunami. The houses involved were transitional shelters, designed to bridge the gap between providing immediate emergency shelter and the construction of permanent housing.

But there are other gaps that this process also addressed – the gap between top-down responses and those that include the people affected; the gap between sectoral responses and the many interrelated needs of those who have been through a calamity like this; the gap between the delivery of assistance and the more complex process of helping people to take control of their lives again. These gaps are familiar to all involved in disaster response work and perhaps most of all to people whose lives have been affected. The intention here is not to suggest that Save the Children in Sri Lanka found solutions to all the complexities of providing assistance after a disaster. It did, however, find sensible ways to respond to many common pitfalls and these deserve to be documented.

Save the Children is not in the business of building housing. Yet, because many people were left out of other shelter responses after the tsunami, Save the Children in Sri Lanka decided to become involved in transitional housing construction in three of the hardest hit districts on Sri Lanka's east coast. A few months later, its first 100 houses were declared by UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) to be the best among the thirty kinds of transitional shelter constructed in Ampara district. Save the Children's shelters met international criteria for disaster relief housing; they were clearly favoured by displaced families and they cost less than comparable solutions. Save the Children's staff in Ampara are sure that their success was due to the simple strategy of consulting with the people they were housing and including them in the building process.

Although the participation of beneficiaries has become a widely accepted development strategy, this basic principle is frequently by-passed in emergency responses. Too often, it is assumed that disaster victims are too traumatised to make decisions about their own lives, or that the participation process will be too time-consuming, when time is critical. As one human rights group put it, "*Disasters bring out a daddy-knows-best attitude in many of the best-intended state agencies and aid institutions. They figure that in crisis, all the lessons they learned in those participation and devolution seminars no longer apply. In fact they apply most urgently!*" (ACHR, 2005).

Ironically, Save the Children's transitional shelter project did not include children and young people in its participatory processes – or at least not in a way that ensured a genuine consideration of their particular perspectives. There were many practical and justifiable reasons for this omission. But there are also practical reasons for working to make children's needs a more routine component of disaster-related shelter responses. Save the Children's experience in Ampara can contribute to a better understanding in this area.

Collecting information

This report draws on visits over the course of a week (April 2005) to numerous families and communities in Ampara living in Save the Children's transitional housing, as well as in other kinds of shelters. There were discussions with re-housed groups and individuals, with the staff of partner organisations, contractors and suppliers, local government representatives and with Save the Children staff. Information drawn from first hand observations and discussions was supplemented by written material – both internal documents and records and those produced by other agencies, organisations and bodies. These are listed in the bibliography.

I must stress the need to take all numbers in this report as approximations (except those numbers that relate to Save the Children's construction.) There are numerous records and lists available in Ampara from different sources offering very precise figures on those displaced, those re-housed, the resources available and so on. But the numbers can vary widely from one source to another. This is understandable. There is no central database on those who survived the tsunami. People move around, definitions differ, raw data can vary in its accuracy and the agenda of those providing the numbers could be doubtful.

The same goes for facts. A week is a short time to gain a thorough understanding of a complicated situation like this. Stories can change depending on the person being interviewed and rumours and guesses have a lot of currency in such circumstances. It was also difficult at times to focus the discussion on the transitional housing process. Many people wanted only to discuss their critical need for permanent housing and livelihoods – in a situation like this any visitor can be viewed as a prospective pipeline to further assistance, no matter how the discussion is introduced. Language is also an issue; I depended on the translations of others for almost all first hand accounts. I have tried to use information from different sources, to provide different perspectives and to clarify complexities wherever possible.

Sheridan Bartlett

Consultant

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AFTER THE TSUNAMI IN AMPARA DISTRICT, SRI LANKA



BACKGROUND

According to Government figures, the tsunami in Sri Lanka killed over 35,000 people, injured over 21,000 and left over 6,500 children without one or both parents (Government of Sri Lanka, 2005). Although Sri Lanka experienced far fewer deaths than Indonesia, it was left with almost twice as many displaced people and with the gigantic task of re-housing them amidst an on-going conflict. A million people were estimated to have been left homeless. A disproportionate number of women died in the tsunami, contributing to a range of social problems in the aftermath. Official data has not been gender disaggregated but surveys indicate that approximately 70 per cent more women than men died in the tsunami (Fisher, 2005).

Ampara, on the east coast of the island, was the most severely hit district, with over a third of the population affected in some way by the tsunami. Depending on the source, deaths in the district are estimated at between 5,000 and 10,000 and more than 37,000 families were displaced along the coast.¹ The homes of more than half of those displaced were totally destroyed. This area had already suffered from 20 years of civil war which resulted in displacement for many people, damaged infrastructure, school drop outs and loss of livelihoods. Even before the tsunami hit Ampara, over 60 per cent of the local population was estimated to be living below the poverty line and there was little cushion for absorbing the additional shock of a disaster. In addition to continuing hostilities between Government forces and LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), tensions and conflict in Ampara between the Tamils and Muslims, the groups that make up most of the coastal population, affect all spheres of life and have added to the complexity of reconstruction.

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¹ 37,000 -39,000 are the figures usually given. However data compiled by division by UNHCR in July 2005 put the number of displaced families at over 77,000.

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*NEED FOR
TRANSITIONAL HOUSING*



Most people displaced by the tsunami moved in with relatives and friends as short term arrangement; others were placed in ‘welfare centres’ set up in schools and other public buildings, where some remained for many months. Given the need for children to return to school, however, most were quickly moved into tent camps and barracks hastily erected by the government and by numerous agencies and organisations that came into the area.

Welfare centres and tent camps were never intended to be more than a very temporary solution. Conditions in these places were challenging and uncomfortable and tents in particular were extremely hot. Inadequate space, poor facilities and no provision for privacy led to social tensions and there were reports from protection workers that many children and women endured abuse of various kinds. Lack of privacy during sleeping, washing, changing clothes and while breastfeeding infants contributed to sexual harassment and violence towards women and adolescent girls in particular (Fisher, 2005, de Silva, 2006). The privacy issue was described by the coordinator of one local partner organisation as being responsible for the majority of social problems arising after the tsunami.

However, the construction of 100,000 permanent dwellings was not something that could happen quickly. The Government and its development partners estimated that the recovery process could take from three to five years (Government of Sri Lanka 2005). There were both practical and bureaucratic constraints. Capacity, both in terms of supplies, skills and the replacement of infrastructure, was one major issue. Adequate coordination among the agencies and organisations involved was another. But a primary concern was related to land and in particular to the contentious buffer zone established by the Government along the coast.

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In all the tsunami-affected regions of affected countries, governments quickly declared certain zones to be unsafe for rebuilding. These buffer zones varied initially from 40 metres in Thailand to two kilometers in Indonesia. But stiff opposition to these regulations and widespread suspicion that exceptions would be made for moneyed interests, led to various adjustments to the original restrictions.

In Sri Lanka, before the tsunami there had been laws in place regulating coastal development, but they had been generally ignored. A new law passed after the tsunami forbade any construction within 100 metres of the coast in the west and south and 200 metres in the more severely affected north and east – including Ampara. This regulation prevented an estimated 30 per cent of the displaced population from returning to their own land. In Ampara, based on figures from the local divisions (the smallest unit of government, comparable to a township), the figure was closer to half of all those displaced.

The buffer zone law, presented by the Government as a safety measure and for the purposes of environmental protection, was highly controversial not only because most people wanted to move back to their land, but because of the scarcity of alternative land and the scale and cost of resettlement. Many people suspected that the buffer zone was created to give more opportunity to the tourist industry. There seemed to be some grounds for this suspicion, as some areas were handed over to the National Tourist Board and various exceptions were granted to the no-construction rules (ACHR, 2005). Until land was identified by the Government for the relocation of those from within the buffer zone, the construction of permanent housing could not move forward, except for those outside the buffer zone – and in Ampara even this was officially acknowledged to be slow (Government of Sri Lanka, 2005).

Therefore, transitional housing was essential and various NGOs quickly began to fill the need. Although the response was immediate, a number of problems soon emerged.

■ **STANDARDS:** To speed up construction, normal planning processes were initially bypassed in many cases. Some NGOs, responding to the urgency of the situation as well as to donor deadlines and the need to spend money quickly, moved ahead without careful consultation and planning. Some of these NGOs were also responding to the initial transitional shelter budget of USD 350 proposed by the Government, which was soon found to be too low. Many shelters were later judged to be substandard. In particular, some shelters were at risk of fire or flooding and many needed to be upgraded before the monsoons, which would start in October and last for several months.

■ **CO-ORDINATION:** While the Government provided the overall policy and guidelines for transitional housing and coordinated the effort at a national level through TAFREN (Task Force to Rebuild the Nation), many important decisions were taken at a much more local level through the Divisional Secretaries (heads of the local divisions) and other local players. Local government, however, had little experience leading its own development and was not well equipped to

manage the NGOs and relief agencies working within their boundaries. There was often poor coordination among agencies, with the result that some people were left out.

■ *UNFULFILLED PLEDGES*: A number of NGOs, both local and international, which had pledged their assistance, left without fulfilling their pledges.

However, despite rapid construction too many people still faced extended periods in tent camps, welfare centres and inadequate transitional shelters. This was the context within which Save the Children in Sri Lanka became involved in transitional housing in the hardest hit zones.



*MOVING TOWARDS
PERMANENT HOUSING*



An understanding of the significance of Save the Children in Sri Lanka's shelter programme also calls for some grasp of the situation with respect to permanent housing in Ampara. Although many tsunami survivors in Sri Lanka, especially in the south, are now in permanent housing, the process in Ampara has been slow and confusing. As in much of the tsunami affected region survivors are often completely in the dark about the situation with regard to their permanent housing; many have not been consulted or informed (PDHRE et al, 2006).

The Sri Lankan Government stated early on that displaced households from within the 200 metre buffer zone would be entitled to a donor-provided house built according to government standards on land further inland to which they would receive full title. Households outside the buffer zone would be provided by the Government with a cash grant funded by donors for reconstruction of their homes. Those with damaged houses would get USD 1000; those whose houses were completely destroyed would get USD 2500 (Government of Sri Lanka, 2005). Initially, it looked as though people from outside the buffer zone would end up with less adequate support (UN special envoy). As time has gone on and those outside the buffer zone have begun to receive their payments, it appears that those from within the original 200 metre zone are the ones who are losing out.

Based on UNHCR figures, almost half (49 per cent) of Ampara's displaced population was from inside the original 200 metre buffer zone. This meant that new land would need to be found for almost 12,000 permanent houses.² The

² The disparity between the total number of damaged and destroyed houses in Ampara (about 24,000 according to UNHCR) and the number of displaced families (generally set at about 37,000-39,000) most likely reflects the number of extended families originally living together, but recorded as separate households.

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result was that progress towards permanent housing was much slower for those from inside the buffer zone. After a number of months, the Government conceded that the buffer zone law was a mistake that had been made without sufficient consultation and local authorities were allowed to propose alternatives. As of early 2006 the buffer zone in Ampara was moved back to 65 metres from the coast in most divisions, although there are variations (in Pottuvil, for instance, which has a small tourist industry, the line has been set at 50 metres.) In the meantime, there had been little progress on permanent housing for those from the contested zone.

By the end of 2005, according to a joint report of the Government and its partners, the great majority of those with damaged or destroyed houses outside the buffer zone had received at least the first of four cash installments. But for those from inside the original buffer zone, less than a third of the promised donor-built houses were actually under construction countrywide. According to the joint report, *“Under the donor-built housing programme some districts indicate rapid progress while in others (such as Ampara) the number of houses assigned to donors is significantly lower than the requirement.”* (Government of Sri Lanka, 2005 p 11).

According to Vasanten, the coordinator of Save the Children in Sri Lanka’s local partner Sweido Vision, there has been serious donor attrition; 141 organisations originally signed on to provide permanent housing; because of the delays, bureaucratic complexities and general confusion, 73 have reportedly ended up pulling out, taking their funds with them.

The people from between the 65 and 200 metre zone appear to occupy a physical and metaphorical no-man’s land. Even the NGOs involved do not seem completely clear about whether these people now come under the same resettlement package as those from outside the original buffer zone or whether they are still to receive donor-provided housing. All of them have apparently been offered the chance to move inland to new group housing sites when land was secured.³ According to the Divisional Secretary of Akurraipattu, who has secured a 60 acre plot of land for the purpose, people are eager to take this option. He said that of the 458 displaced households from within the original buffer zone, 303 had expressed their willingness to move. He was confident the reconstruction would move ahead. At the same time, however, he acknowledged that he had received no funds from the Central Government since the beginning of the year to carry out routine activities.

Some of the displaced people we spoke to in this division said they had given their signed approval to this relocation – but with reluctance in most cases. “We don’t want to leave, but we have no other option,” they said. Others refuse to move away and feel that doing what they can on their own makes more sense than

3 The Colombo-based head of the Centre for National Operations, the government agency coordinating relief in Sri Lanka, was quoted in the early weeks after the tsunami as follows: Our idea is to move the fishermen into housing away from the coast that is different, vastly different, from what they were used to. The type of housing that will be designed - apartments or small cabanas - will definitely be more modern than what they’re used to and that’s what our team of architects and engineers are putting together.” <http://www.lankalibrary.com/news/housing.htm> Jehangir S. Pocha, Globe Correspondent, January 30, 2005. This mindset is in direct conflict with people’s desires to go back to something as close as possible to the kind of housing they were accustomed to.

waiting for what they describe as ‘empty promises’. Some people have somehow managed to purchase plots outside the buffer zone on their own, anxious not to lose the chance to maintain as much continuity with their old lives as possible. Others wish to build on their now-legal land. But most organisations are not eager to be involved in individual housing projects. These people also run the risk of forfeiting their chance at a resettlement package from the Government. Most of those we spoke to sit and wait with little sense of what will happen, or when.

Official figures only add to the confusion. February 2006 records claim that no further people remain in either emergency or transitional housing in Akarraipattu – that all are either with relatives or in permanent housing. Yet it was possible to count at least 300 occupied transitional shelters in this division. Is this simply a typographical error? Or is it a genuine misunderstanding on the part of local government or part of a systematic effort to deny responsibility? And so permanent housing remains a challenge and an area of real uncertainty in Ampara. It is also a constant preoccupation for all those who still remain without it and one that makes it difficult to proceed with their lives.



*SCALE OF SAVE THE
CHILDREN'S INVOLVEMENT*

Save the Children in Sri Lanka had not intended to provide housing initially. There were many other organisations filling this role and Save the Children was dealing with education, protection and livelihood issues. But given the scale of the need, the organisation decided it was worth stepping into this unfamiliar area and supporting the construction of some transitional shelters. The plan was to focus on those people who had failed to be picked up by other NGOs. Save the Children had several criteria to consider. Beneficiaries had to be tsunami-affected people who had not received shelter support from any other agency or any commitment for such support. Those from inside the buffer zone had to be unable to return home; those from outside the zone had to be able to return home and to repair or reconstruct their house. The work was to be undertaken in Jaffna, Trincomalee and Ampara districts.

In Ampara, where UNHCR had the role of coordinating the NGO response, over 17,000 transitional shelters were needed in nine divisions along the coast. Save the Children's Ampara manager pledged to produce 100 shelters in three divisions. In June 2005, M I Nizar was hired to run the organisation's transitional shelter programme in Ampara. Trained as an architect and construction estimator, Nizar brought many years of experience in both local government and the private sector to the job. These assets, along with the solid support provided to the shelter team by the management, were invaluable for Save the Children in Sri Lanka's success with transitional housing. Partners were quickly selected and work started on the

first 100 houses. These were completed by August 2005 and it was at the handing over ceremony that UNHCR, in its capacity as the lead agency for the area, proclaimed them the best of all the transitional shelters in Ampara. UNHCR requested that Save the Children take on another 423 transitional shelters as well as upgrade 41 shelters built by another agency.

By the end of the year, Save the Children in Sri Lanka and the local organisations it worked with had completed almost all of this second phase of shelters. All that was left undone were the toilets and wells for houses in the Pottuvil division.

This is a wet low-lying area and the arrival of the monsoons in October made the work impossible. By the time monsoon was over it was 2006, the project cycle had ended and no further funds were allotted for the transitional housing programme for the new year.

Work completed in 2005

Transitional shelters built	523
Shelters upgraded	41
Toilets installed	507
Wells dug	51
Number of people housed	2635
Muslim families/Tamil families	431/133
Families on own land/on alternative sites	349/215

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*SAVE THE CHILDREN'S BASIC
TRANSITIONAL HOUSE PLAN*

Because Save the Children in Sri Lanka entered the transitional housing sector in Ampara some months after other organisations had already produced some shelters, it was possible to learn from their successes and failures. Save the Children paid attention to both government and international minimum standards for transitional shelter⁴ and also considered the responses of people living in existing shelters. It came up with a basic plan that took their experience into account and in particular, their general desire for a dwelling that felt more secure.

The basic plan developed by the shelter team ('basic' because it was intended to be adaptable to individual family needs) consisted of two adjoining rooms, 10'x 9' each with a 6'x6' kitchen at one end. The house has been constructed fully. It is not the kind of flimsy shelters often put up in these situations for temporary use. Block walls are set on a two foot thick brick and mortar foundation covered with a thin cement floor and topped with a traditional *cadjan* (palm) roof except over the kitchen, where corrugated tin is used. Ventilation is provided through two doors and two windows.



There were practical reasons for all decisions about materials. These involved comfort, reusability of materials and people's traditional preferences.

- A solid foundation was needed to provide a base for a heavy building but it also had to be easily removable for the convenience of those private land owners who were making space available only on a temporary basis or for people on

⁴ See annex 2

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their own land who would be replacing it with a larger house. A poured concrete foundation could not have been so easily broken up and removed.

- For walls, people in this area have long used plastered masonry for both its durability and resistance to hot weather. Many people in other parts of the larger tsunami region prefer more permeable materials and a more airy open plan to encourage the movement of air, but people in Sri Lanka would rather have a solid house, especially for the security it provides. The favoured wall material in Ampara is brick covered with plaster. However, brick of decent quality was hard to come by after the tsunami while cement blocks allow for rapid construction. The block can be quickly broken down, cleaned up and re-used for future building.
- The preferred roofing material in Sri Lanka is tile, but this is expensive and calls for a much sturdier roofing structure to hold it up. The traditional *cadjan* or woven palm roof is inexpensive and cool compared to tin and other sheeting. It dries up quickly and needs replacing every year in order to resist the monsoon rains. However, it can be cheaply replaced. Tin was used over the kitchen extension because of the greater risk of fire here.



In addition to the basic structure, toilets with septic tanks were provided in most cases, wells were dug or cleaned out where necessary and electrical wiring was installed to provide for four light bulbs and an outlet. The understanding was that the local government would then connect houses to the grid. (This did not always happen; in Pottuvil, notably, the local government failed to live up to its promises.) Where houses were built individually, wells and toilets were provided on an as-needed basis (people living on the land owned by relatives who already had an adequate toilet or well, for instance, did not get one.) Where houses were clustered, group toilets were built and shower areas were provided, one for men and another for women.



*THE CONSTRUCTION
PROCESS*

Constructing these shelters, simple as they were, was a task with many components. It involved finding partners to work with, selecting and working with beneficiaries, dealing with the complexities of land, supplies and labour, as well as the actual construction.

Relationship with partners and contractors

Save the Children in Sri Lanka most often works through local partner organisations and this was the procedure followed for the initial 100 transitional shelters in Ampara. However, because the administrative side of establishing a formal partnership takes time and because Save the Children had the internal capacity to manage parts of the overall process, it switched to working on a contract basis for the second phase. Under this process, the organisation purchased supplies directly and handed them over to the NGOs that managed the construction.

Partners	Division
SweidoVision	Thirukkovil
United Foundation	Akkaraipattu
Mahasakthi	Alayadivembu

Contractors	Division
EMSW	Pottuvil
United Foundation	Pottuvil
FEED	Pottuvil
Benzene	Akkairapattu
USDO	Ninthavur
CSA	Ninthavur
WDF	Kalumai

Given this situation, there was not a wide choice of local NGOs to work with. Save the Children selected groups as far as possible based on their staff capacity, past experience, relationship with the community and audits of their prior work. In general, it was considered more important to work with groups from within a particular locality than to go further ahead for those with more experience.

With both partners and contractors, the shelter team closely supervised all construction activities. This included tight financial and quality controls, which extended to the careful assessment and

measurement of every house after construction to ensure that all materials billed for had actually been used and that work was up to standard. Full accountability was required and in some cases contractors had to refund Save the Children when there were discrepancies. This level of care served to control costs and communicated the seriousness of Save the Children's Ampara office with regard to thoroughness and accountability.

Selection of beneficiaries

The selection of people for the housing followed a clear procedure. Lists of those displaced were first compiled by local community leaders and then passed on to the Divisional Secretariat, which in turn passed names on to UNHCR at divisional coordination meetings. Here a discussion was held on the most appropriate actors to fill the gaps. UNHCR passed a list on to Save the Children in Sri Lanka, which then identified the most suitable partners and contractors for specific areas. The identified households were carefully checked by partners and contractors to ensure that they met Save the Children in Sri Lanka's criteria. The fact that it was assigned

by UNHCR to work mostly with Muslim households (77 per cent) highlights the fact that the project was filling important gaps. Although Muslims make up 41 per cent of the population in Ampara, their areas have been generally sidelined in the delivery of assistance.

Land

In about 60 per cent of cases, Save the Children in Sri Lanka was able to build the shelters on people's own land. For the rest, alternative sites were needed. Sometimes, lands of relatives were used. In other cases, it was necessary to find other private land that could be available for at least three years. Earlier in the transitional housing process, some NGOs had made the mistake of building shelters on empty land without first clarifying ownership. Save the Children was careful to ensure that signed agreements were obtained, usually for use of the land without rent and that there was a clear understanding about the condition in which the land would be returned (for instance, with all materials including foundations, fully removed.) In Akkaraipattu and Thirukkovil, some households that could not return to their own land (40 in the latter case) were clustered on single sites with shared facilities. The great majority of the shelters, however, were built on separate and scattered sites. Hence, concerns about shared land and common space were not a focus for most of the transitional shelter project.

Building supplies and labour

With large scale construction going on around the country, there were inevitable shortages in some areas along with increase in prices and problems with quality. Transportation of supplies was also difficult. In many places bridges had been washed out or damaged and trucks were permitted to carry limited weights. *Hartals* (road strikes) related to communal tensions also complicated timely deliveries. The capacity for production was more stretched during monsoons. River sand for making blocks and mortar is difficult to access when the waters are high. Concrete block production also dips since the blocks cannot dry properly. Counting on the demand and the frequent ignorance of NGO buyers, suppliers would charge for the highest quality materials but deliver second rate goods. For instance, they often increased the ratio of sand to cement in making blocks seriously compromising quality and mixed bad blocks with good ones. It was common practice to charge NGOs at a higher rate and the willingness of some NGOs to pay these inflated prices drove up prices for all.

All of these factors made it a challenge to estimate costs properly and to ensure that materials of adequate quality would be available when needed. Nizar's experience in the sector made him well aware of all the ways suppliers could cut corners. He and Save the Children in Sri Lanka's partners took measures to ensure they received what they paid for and had materials on hand when they needed them. They took bids from at least four suppliers for all materials and checked prices on a daily basis. They checked the quality of all deliveries and sent back whatever did not meet their standards. They set up agreements with suppliers whereby penalties would be paid if materials were not available within the expected time – with flexibility in cases where *hartals* disrupted delivery. They ordered lumber months before they would need it for windows, doors and roof framing and stuck it up to dry properly, so that it would not warp and split. One partner,

United Foundation, paid for materials up front with a bridge loan in anticipation of reimbursement from Save the Children in Sri Lanka and stored them in its warehouse. Another, Sweido Vision, negotiated with block suppliers, who agreed, in return for an advance, to supply to only Save the Children's project until it was complete. The suppliers also agreed to keep a fixed price and take on community members as labourers, thereby speeding the process, ensuring quality and providing people with some income.

Skilled labour was scarce following the tsunami. In a few cases, people with skills were found among the people to be housed, but for the most part they had to be hired from the surrounding area. Unskilled labour was drawn from the beneficiaries, who cleared and prepared land, dug foundations and wells, carried materials and provided meals and drinks for workers. They were paid for their time, but not according to the same rate everywhere. Some contractors paid according to going rates, others according to the quality of the work done. Only one organisation (USDO) said that people volunteered their time to carry materials and provide labour for their own houses.

The result of all this care was that houses cost relatively less than the market price. At approximately USD 560 (not including toilet), they cost about 75 per cent of the closest equivalent, a model comparable in size, but using planks instead of a full block wall and wooden posts rather than a full foundation.⁵ Comparisons with most transitional models were not possible because of the reluctance of organisations to reveal their costs.

Involvement of communities

Both partners and contractors dealt directly with the households and communities receiving homes. Save the Children required that the construction process include the involvement of these people. The partners and contractors varied considerably in how they fulfilled this requirement. Some gave only the most superficial attention to people's input; others genuinely allowed people the space to take some control over the process. This critical issue will be discussed below in more detail.

5 For a breakdown of the Save the Children in Sri Lanka transitional shelter costs, see Appendix B



*OCCUPANT RESPONSES TO
SAVE THE CHILDREN'S HOUSING
AND ALTERNATIVES*

When UNHCR pronounced Save the Children in Sri Lanka's houses to be the best in Ampara, it was comparing them to the shelters produced by 32 other organisations, including UNHCR's own. It is not hard to see why they were preferred. More than two thirds of these other models provided only a single room and no kitchen. Many had no windows or were made of materials such as tin sheeting or tar paper that turned the shelters into virtual ovens in hot weather. "They are like a bakery," some people said. Many houses were made of materials that felt insecure to people – plastic or canvas cloth, woven palm strips or flimsy quarter inch plywood. These are people who have experienced twenty years of conflict and the need for secure space is a high priority. Most of these other shelters appear to have been designed for the very short term, despite the fact that families were likely on average to be spending at least a few years in these transitional homes.

In discussing people's reactions to these different shelters, it is useful to consider the kind of housing that most of them occupied before the tsunami. Although circumstances varied, people most commonly lived in tile roofed, plastered brick houses with four or five rooms, one of them a kitchen. Norms of privacy dictated that parents would sleep in one room and children in another. Where there were older children, the girls slept in one room and boys used the 'hall' or a more public room towards the front of the house. Tamil houses included a small room specifically for prayer. This room was supposed to be kept separate from other functions in the house and in particular was off bounds to any menstruating women or girls. These houses were generally separated from one another either by distance or, in more congested areas, by high garden walls. For everyone we spoke to, the ideal was to return to a house like this. People were not drawn to innovation. This was what they were accustomed to and what they wanted. Even the best transitional shelters, then, meant considerable compromise and adaptation in living patterns. In this context, we can consider what people liked and did not like about the transitional shelters.

- **COMFORT:** Almost everyone we talked to stressed that Save the Children's houses were more comfortable than others. The palm roofs and block walls meant they were cooler than the alternatives and an enormous improvement over the conditions endured in camps and welfare centres. Windows were also important. Foundations were high enough off the ground to ensure that interiors stayed dry when it rained – although it was clear that the *cadjan* roofs would need to be replaced in order to make it through another monsoon.

- **SPACE AND PRIVACY:** At 216 square feet, these shelters were not large – although they exceeded the government standard of 200 square feet. People generally had few possessions such as rolled mats for sleeping at night, clothing on lines hanging along the wall and some basic cooking equipment. But in some cases these shelters housed families of eight or nine people and space, especially for sleep, was a real issue. In some cases, parents slept outside to make enough room for all the children at night. People appreciated the dividing wall that allowed for some measure of privacy as well as the enclosed kitchen space. Many other kinds of shelters, although containing more square feet, are just one room. It appeared in general to be more important to people to have more rooms than to have more space.

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■ **SECURITY:** The sense of solidity and security provided by the block walls was important to everyone we spoke to. No other transitional shelter material appeared to ensure this for people. They were scornful about the flimsiness of most walls, about the fact that even plywood could easily be ripped off and that people could peer through cracks in timber walls. We heard no actual reports of theft or harassment in other shelters, but this seemed a critically important issue to these conflict affected people.

■ **TOILETS, WELLS AND WASHING FACILITIES:** People appreciated the availability of these critical facilities and in the case of clustered shelter, the fact that separate facilities were available to men and women. The availability of handrails up to toilets for elderly people was also mentioned. (It appeared to be of no real concern that small children would not use these toilets. This will be discussed further below.) In Pottuvil, where Save the Children had been unable to provide toilets and water, people discussed the serious inconvenience entailed in relying on neighbours.



It seemed important also to get the perceptions of some people living in other kinds of shelters, to ensure that those in Save the Children – supported shelters were not simply feeling pressured to be positive by the presence of those who had provided them support. We stopped at four or five different kinds of shelters and spoke informally to the people there. The concerns were identical. These people invariably brought up issues of comfort and health (many shelters were too hot because of tin roofing and lack of ventilation); they lacked privacy; they were dependent on neighbours for water and toilets; and most of all they felt plagued by insecurity. They wanted masonry walls. But as one woman said, “What can we say? Anything is better than nothing.”

One of the shelters we stopped at had only a few articles of clothing in it. Someone went to find the owner, who was staying in another building nearby. We asked her opinion of this house. “You call this a house!” she said. “How can anyone live here? No ventilation. No kitchen. No privacy. I’m too scared to spend a night here. It’s not secure.”

Perhaps the best illustration was a case where a Save the Children’s transitional shelter stood right next to one provided by another agency. They were owned by related families who shared the land. Although the other shelter appeared bright

and roomy, the family said that since the Save the Children shelter had been completed, they all lived and slept there while the other was used only for storage. None of the residents of these other shelters said they had been involved or consulted in any way on the plans or process.

Discussions with all these people pointed to the importance of local perceptions and preferences. New houses provided by the army and various NGOs that looked similar to Save the Children's transitional shelters were dismissed with contempt as "dark caves" and in many cases were standing empty. Where people had a chance to voice their preferences, they chose something traditionally airy and open, with more verandah than covered space. Rather than solid masonry foundations to protect them from flooding and high winds, they wanted houses high on stilts that water could flow under if necessary. Rather than block walls, they wanted traditional woven palm so that air could move freely. Rather than concrete floors, they wanted planks with gaps between them, so that they could sweep debris onto the sand below. These differences highlight the critical need for local consultation rather than generic disaster-response models based on the expert opinions of outside planners and designers.



*CHANGES AND
IMPROVEMENTS
TO THE BASIC PLAN*

The degree to which contractors and partners encouraged the involvement of people in the planning process was directly reflected in the number of modifications made to the original plan in different target areas. However, given the constraints in terms of finances and the procurement of supplies, the changes people could actually make were fairly limited. They couldn't expand the size of the basic structure or alter the materials used. But depending on the flexibility of the contractor, they could alter layout in various ways and change the placement of windows and doors. Within these basic constraints, people came up with numerous variations. In some cases (notably the 40 shelter cluster in Thirukovil) changes made to the basic plan were made by the whole group and carried out identically in each building. More frequently, they reflected the priorities of individual households.

Many people changed the interior layout. The original plan called for an interior partition with an opening at one end, allowing for movement between the two main rooms. The location of this opening changed from house to house and in the all-Tamil Thirukovil cluster, it was eliminated completely. This was because of the need felt by Tamil families for a prayer room. It was impossible to set aside one room exclusively for prayer in such a small house, but by closing the interior opening and providing a separate door to the outside, people ensured that the room was apart from other routine activities. This room was often used for housework and storage and sometimes for sleeping.

People changed the position of windows and doors. In most cases, this was a response to the location and orientation of nearby houses. People wanted to ensure their privacy, to avoid looking out over a toilet or to keep out smoke and cinders from another family's kitchen. In most cases, households preferred to have one of their two exterior doors in the kitchen section. In others, they wanted doors front and back in the main part of the house. Some households wanted the upper half of the kitchen wall to be open and covered with wire mesh to allow for better ventilation of cooking smoke. Others preferred the full block wall.

Some changes were also made to the "footprint" of the house. A few households placed the kitchen perpendicular to the rest of the house as a way to improve the use of the outdoor space available to them. In one household, the toilet was connected to the house rather than being a separate structure. In Thirukovil, where the two exterior doors were side by side in the adjoining but separated main rooms, people asked to extend the concrete doorstep by two feet so that it ran the full distance, thereby creating a longer outside sitting space and encouraging people to socialize.

Where houses were clustered, important decisions were made about overall site layout such as where toilets and washing facilities were to be, how houses were arranged relative to one another, whether relatives and friends could be in proximity to each other; whether those who were elderly were placed closer to toilets.

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More changes and improvements were made after construction was complete. Many families added simple lean-to extensions to create a covered verandah. In some cases this area was enclosed with *cadjan* or plastic sheeting for privacy. Some families used this covered area for cooking. Others added a small lean-to to one end of the house out of plywood, planks or tin sheeting for use as a kitchen space. They were then able to free up the inside kitchen for other uses. In one case it had become a prayer room. In other cases it became a storage area, or a quiet place for children to study. One household even used the kitchen as a small shop.

In a few cases, people have invested even more time, effort and resources to turn their shelters into proper long term houses. One family has plastered and painted the inside of the house and painted floors, doors and windows. The difference this has made for an investment of USD 100 is considerable. The house feels lighter, brighter and larger. This family plans to add another room as well and to plaster and paint the exterior. In another house belonging to a skilled mason, lintels have been inserted over the doorways for permanence and the roof has been raised and extended to form a sturdy permanent verandah (see photos).





*IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER
AREAS OF SAVE THE
CHILDREN'S PROGRAMMING*

There has been little explicit integration between programmes in Save the Children in Sri Lanka's post-tsunami work. This is partly because of the lack of multi-sectoral needs assessment early on and partly because of the rather scattered and sectoral way in which needs were being responded to and responsibilities assigned in the more general tsunami response. But the shelter programme undoubtedly had implications for other areas of Save the Children programming – protection, education and to some degree, livelihoods.

The protection benefits have been most marked, as families and children moved out of the congested camps and welfare centres where many social norms for behaviour were undermined by difficult conditions. There were repeated references to the difficulties associated with many families living together in one open space, with no privacy for dressing or bathing or even for families crowded together in a tent. Many were reluctant to acknowledge the extent of the problems and said that given the situation, people had managed well. But staff from both Save the Children in Sri Lanka and partner organisations, along with some of the more vocal women, made it clear that the situation resulted in many abuses. In their own houses with walls and boundaries in place, it was possible for families to recover some of their lost privacy and to regain some sense of control over their own world. As one 15-year-old girl said with clear relief, "There is nothing like staying in your own house. I really like just being with my own family again."

Protection in this context meant more than just protection from abuse. Many children were suffering from nightmares, grief and anxiety after the tsunami. All the parents emphasized the importance of them being around other children. This was one area where there were advantages to the clustered housing and even, to some degree, the camps and welfare centres. One mother with two young children was especially clear on this. In the Thirrukovil community (40 households), she said there were always other children around for her children to play with and this distracted them from their worries and sadness. She knew they would be safe there even when she wasn't watching them. She said that in future she would prefer this kind of setting to the separated housing they had been accustomed to. A 12-year-old boy said that this was the best thing about living in this cluster of housing – he played cricket and other games with his friends, although there was not really enough space to play freely without irritating the adults.

Adults did not always consider the number of children in these clustered settings to be an asset. According to one group of mothers, having other children always right outside the door makes it difficult to enforce homework. Sri Lankans take their children's education very seriously and one of the more common complaints about the camps and clustered housing was the difficulty for children trying to do homework. Most families, however, found the situation much improved in the transitional housing, with decent light to work by and more space. But it was far from ideal and many people said that a quiet place for study was one of the most important reasons for needing permanent housing.

There was no opportunity to speak to livelihoods' staff at Save the Children in Sri Lanka about connections with the transitional housing programme, but staff

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from some of the partners and contractors made it clear that they would appreciate a greater opportunity to work with their shelter occupants in this area. Secure shelter is often considered a springboard for informal enterprises but there was surprisingly little evidence of that connection here. Of those people whom we visited, one family, as mentioned above, had used their kitchen space to open a small shop; another man was repairing bicycles in a sheltered area near his house. And in some cases, the move from welfare centres to transitional shelter back on their own land had given fishermen better access to their former livelihood. But the majority of those in Save the Children shelters were Muslim families; the men were more likely to have been small businessmen than fishermen and their wives did not work traditionally. They felt a strong need for financial capital or goods to restart a business.

It is clear to most of those interviewed that, had it been possible, more holistic responses to specific communities would have been a more constructive way to proceed, making it possible to build on existing relationships and to take advantage of the potential synergies between sectoral responses.



***PARTICIPATION AND
RECOVERY***

The importance of the participation of tsunami survivors in the reconstruction process has been proclaimed throughout the region by actors at every level. It was part of government standards for reconstruction, part of the dogma of most NGOs and certainly a basic tenet for human rights groups monitoring the situation. Yet participation can mean many things and the genuine involvement of households and communities has been remarkably absent from much of the recovery process. There are many inspiring stories about involved communities taking charge of their own lives (see for example, ACHR, 2005). But there are many more accounts of survivors from all over the tsunami-afflicted region who have been denied an active role in their own recovery and even information about their situation (PDHRE et al, 2006). Many people 16 months later still do not know where they will end up or when they will leave the ‘temporary’ emergency shelter that prevents any semblance of normal life. This level of uncertainty adds considerably to the general stress and undermines the capacity of people to take control of their own lives. The lack of information and active involvement is a major contributor to the culture of dependency, which is seen by many as a negative by-product of disaster assistance.

Within Save the Children in Sri Lanka’s transitional housing program in Ampara, participation was certainly encouraged. Partner NGOs and contractors were expected to consult with people (men, women and children separately) about plans and to involve them in the process. The way this happened, however, depended to a large extent on the experience and values of each of these organisations.

To some degree, this was because of the lack of preparation on Save the Children’s side. According to Shah Liton, Save the Children in Sri Lanka’s District Manager in Ampara, time pressures and new staff hired after the tsunami meant there was little chance for the kind of training he would have liked. (The very fact that Shah is the fourth manager in the office since the tsunami is indicative in itself of the managerial problems involved.) The same pressures were true for the partners. Sweido Vision’s staff, for instance, grew from 43 before the tsunami to 132 afterwards. Save the Children’s basic principles were explained to all staff and partners but this was superficial at best. Otherwise there was only hands-on induction and the need to accomplish a lot in a short time. The concept of “participation” was not deeply ingrained in many of the staff. For people like Nizar and his team, who had never worked in the NGO sector or directly with communities, it was an appealing idea but an unfamiliar process. It is important to note, however, the general culture of participation within the district office itself, where Shah Liton convenes an open meeting every morning with all staff members and where all concerns are shared and discussed.

The range of participation that the different partners and contractors supported, at least with adults, covered almost the entire possible spectrum. At one end was an NGO that involved people only to the extent of having them identify where on their land they wanted their house. When asked, if they discussed shelter plans with them their director responded, “We did not want to do that. It would have complicated things. It’s only temporary housing and the plan was perfectly adequate.” At the other end of the spectrum was an organisation like USDO that had a real

commitment to community-driven development and years of experience in supporting structures and processes through which communities are given the space to establish and pursue their own priorities. Their response to the same question (“Did you discuss the plan?”) was, “Well of course! They are the people who were going to live in these houses, not us. They had to decide what their needs were.”

When the initial planning phase genuinely involved people, it was undoubtedly more time consuming but also more likely to generate a responsive, efficient construction process. Vasanten, the head of Sweido Vision, spoke of the process that took place after he discovered 40 families still in tents in March in his catchment area. He gathered everyone in a meeting and helped people themselves to collect all relevant information about their households and specific needs. They established one committee that represented the larger community of which they were a part and another representing just these 40 households. There were constant meetings throughout the construction process to deal with well digging, water storage and piping throughout the site. With remarkable efficiency and collaboration, all 40 families were housed within 60 days.

In terms of the shelters themselves, the difference in participation was evident. Where the less participatory NGOs were in charge, no changes had been made to the initial plan. Where NGOs supported people’s involvement, the changes were extensive and demonstrated creative responses to the particular challenges faced by individual households. There was no evidence that these shelters took longer to build or that the changes complicated the overall process. On the contrary, when people felt they had some control, they were more likely to contribute with energy to the construction. Staff in the most non-participatory NGO were dismissive of the abilities of those they served. “These people depend on us for everything!”, they said. By contrast, staff from an NGO (UF) that supported a more community-driven process spoke admiringly of the energy invested by people, despite the fact that they were physically and mentally in bad shape after the tsunami.

The same households and communities that were more involved in the planning process were also those that made the most significant additions and improvements after the shelters were built. Among the less-involved groups, there seemed to be little energy for later improvements and adaptations. In Pottuvil, where no changes at all were made to the plan, people were the most inclined to express dissatisfaction with their houses. When asked if they thought of doing anything to improve their houses, one man responded “These are Save the Children’s houses. It is up to Save the Children to improve them.” All the women nodded in agreement.

It is hard to know the causes in cases like these. Were these people helpless and discontented because they had not been supported to take an active role in solving their own problems or was their state of mind after the tsunami so bad that they were unable to take an active role? This particular group of people did indeed appear to have had an especially difficult time. They had larger families than average and they described how hard it was for anyone to sleep at night. No toilets and wells had been installed in this area (as explained above) and women and girls in particular faced serious hardships. The Government had failed to connect them

to the electric grid as promised, which made studying difficult for their children. Many among them were widows and sheer survival was a serious problem. This was also an area that had been marginalized in the overall response. Save the Children in Sri Lanka's shelters were the only ones that had been provided and rather than seeing them as a temporary solution, people were sure this was all they would ever get.

A common assumption around the tsunami area appears to have been that first families need to be re-housed – and then there will be time to think about rebuilding the community and helping people to get on with their lives again. This overlooks the enormous potential for the shelter process to contribute to the rebuilding of communities and shattered lives.⁶ Given the opportunity and responsibility to make choices and decisions regarding their immediate living conditions, people can begin to take steps in the difficult task of regaining control of their lives. Even a simple decision about where to put a window can be an antidote to passivity and dependence. Larger decisions that require the cooperation of a number of households (like who should get the houses closest to the toilets) can help to promote negotiation and trust. Every decision made unnecessarily on people's behalf becomes a lost opportunity. In Thailand a valuable observation was heard. Apparently, every intervention can be assessed on a simple basis – whether it ends up making people and communities weaker or stronger.⁷ There was no evidence in Ampara that transitional housing simply delivered to people without their involvement played any role in making them stronger. As one Sri Lankan commentator pointed out, just building houses is not enough to reconstruct shattered communities (de Silva, 2006).

USDO's model is especially useful to consider in this regard. It was not simply a matter of providing people with the opportunity to make decisions around the shelter plan. This opportunity was provided within a structure that can now serve as the basis for continued community-driven processes. According to Basheer of USDO's programme team, the potential recipients of transitional housing were first helped to organise themselves into community based organisations (CBOs), the elected leadership of which would be able to negotiate for its members. As in the case of other locally formed CBOs which were already USDO members (working on micro-credit, livelihoods work and a number of other efforts) this provides the organisational foundation for on-going decision making and community-driven development.

6 This can be true even earlier in the process as well, through the management of emergency camps. A visit to Thailand's south coast with a staff member from CODI, the progressive government institution which supports community driven processes, indicated that when camps were managed from the beginning by residents, with NGOs serving in only a support capacity, this was a successful way for people to mobilize and organise themselves.

7 Conversation with a District Manager for CODI, mentioned in footnote 6.



*QUALITY OF ATTENTION
GIVEN TO CHILDREN*

There is little question that the transitional shelter programme had profound benefits for the children involved in terms of health, security, safety and the chance to resume some semblance of normal family life. It is also true that the more involved their parents and neighbours were in the transitional shelter process, the more likely children were to feel the benefits. Engaged, active adults are more inclined to be responsive and supportive with their children.

However, children can also play a constructive role in the rebuilding process both for the valuable perspective they can bring to it and for the additional strength and confidence this involvement can provide them.

Even with the more participatory partner NGOs, however, there was no genuine involvement of children or young people. All contractors and partners were expected to consult with children. This, however, does appear to have happened, but without the kind of preparation, understanding or commitment that would guarantee anything more than the most token attention. None of the partners or contractors understood there might be some practical reasons for such consultation. The following comments were typical: “There was not really enough time to talk to children”; “These were only temporary shelters, so it did not make any difference”; “It’s not actually customary here to ask children for their opinion”; “These shelters were so much better than the welfare camps that they were sure to have been happy with them.” The attempts to gather children for these visits was evidence of the general lack of understanding: either the children were under three or four years of age or else were greatly outnumbered by adults urging them loudly to speak up. The children responded mechanically or not at all. Time did not allow us to arrange something that would be more conducive to real exchange.

As with the adults who remained unengaged, this was a lost opportunity. Experience from around the world tells us that children and young people can be perceptive assessors of their own environments and needs and resourceful problem solvers. The range of possible modifications with regard to these shelters and their surroundings was not large, but without knowing how these children viewed their situation and surroundings, it is impossible to tell what contributions they might have made, for instance with regard to space for play and options for homework.

This is not intended to be a criticism of the shelter staff whose primary mandate was to house as many people as quickly as possible in secure economical shelters. There was not the background or experience here to recognize that children might have a particular perspective to bring to the planning process or to understand that two or three years in the life of a child is actually more than “just temporary”. It is important also to bear in mind that the necessary conditions for working effectively with children may be absent in a situation like this. As Jo Boyden has pointed out, when adults are displaced and under stress there may be considerable resistance to placing children in a decision-making role that is culturally unfamiliar and that may serve to intensify the lack of efficacy that adults themselves are feeling. “In fact,”

says Boyden, “many parents feel constrained to minimise children’s problems, possibly out of guilt or anxiety at having failed to provide them with adequate care and protection during crisis” (Boyden, 2001).

While these factors all help to explain the lack of involvement on the part of children, they do not eliminate the need to consider how this might have been handled differently. The answers all point to the need for more holistic, integrated responses at every level.

There is considerable expertise within Save the Children. More collaboration between sectors within Save the Children in Sri Lanka or more help from other partners in the region could have been valuable in creating some understanding and space for children’s involvement. At the same time, this would have strengthened the understanding of other sectors about the impact of adequate shelter for their own work. Even more important though, would be the coordination and insight at higher levels (local government, central government, UNHCR) that would permit the kind of community-based response that promotes integration between sectors. As it was, organisations with a range of expertise found themselves providing shelter in some places, livelihood support and even protection for children in others.

A further step towards building genuine participation at all levels is the kind of structure set up by USDO with its members, allowing people the space to negotiate their own solutions rather than passively waiting for assistance. What does this have to do with children’s involvement? Rights for children invariably make more sense in a context where adults see themselves as the holders of rights. On a more specific level, where adults have experienced the importance and the benefits of genuine involvement and engagement for themselves, they are more likely to understand the rationale for consulting their children and less likely to see this as a threat to their own authority (Hart, 1997).

Not all children are old enough to be engaged in expressing their priorities. Taking children’s concerns more actively into account implies also a more active role for caregivers in planning and decision-making. This can involve some awareness-raising. A good example is the case of small children and the use of community latrines in the clustered transitional housing. One young mother acknowledged that young children never use these latrines. This is common worldwide. Children tend to be frightened of falling into adult-sized openings and caregivers are often reluctant or unable to take the time to accompany them to toilets at a distance (Bartlett, 2003). As a result, the excreta of children under five or six ends up on the ground and must be picked up and disposed of. Even with conscientious disposal this remains a health hazard, greatly increasing the potential for fecal-oral contamination and the endemic ill health that accompanies it. Open defecation is still a common practice in rural areas and in poor communities worldwide, yet children’s vulnerability to sanitation-related disease calls for more careful consideration and discussion of this problem. For Save the Children in Sri Lanka, the provision of shelter should ideally include the involvement of caregivers and others in debating practical solutions to this issue.

As reconstruction continues in these devastated areas, a very positive role for children and young people emerges. In rebuilding after the tsunami, attention is being given primarily to housing stock and infrastructure. But the community space around housing also needs to be built and given more integrated attention. The capacity of young people to play a constructive role in this arena is well documented. It is also widely accepted that neighbourhoods that work well for children also work well for everyone else. Save the Children could play a central role in this regard, providing a model in tsunami affected areas over the coming years for the development of child-friendly common spaces that provide a material foundation for the social rebuilding of communities. In practical terms, this could be undertaken working together with schools or through child clubs (which already exist in the area and according to Save the Children in Sri Lanka staff, often without a clear direction for practical action.)



*CONCLUSIONS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS*

Save the Children in Sri Lanka's transitional shelter project, however small in the larger scale of things, has provided invaluable support to over 500 households and is a credit to an organisation with no prior experience in this area. The project owes much of its success to the experience and integrity of the shelter team and to the steady management support that backed them up. The timing of the intervention also made it possible to learn from the experience of other organisations and to ensure that the same mistakes were not made.

The project in many cases has provided more than just shelter. Save the Children in Sri Lanka's requirement that people be consulted fit well with the existing commitment and capacity of some of the partners and contractors. In those cases, the process of engagement improved the practicality of the shelters for those occupying them, resulting in more value for the money invested. But more importantly, the provision of shelter became an entry point for a more general process of community rebuilding, rather than a contribution to the kind of dependency that can so easily accompany disaster assistance. The communities that were given the space to become more involved and active emerged stronger and better equipped to continue rebuilding their lives.

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There is far more that could be done in this respect. Save the Children has laid the groundwork in many ways for a more integrated, holistic phase in its contribution to reconstruction in Ampara. There are still many gaps in this devastated district. Over 900 families at last count still remain in tents and welfare centres. Many more wait for some kind of permanent solution. Save the Children in Sri Lanka has developed the knowledge, experience and network to make substantial contributions in future and given the scale of the need, it would be a waste not to capitalise on these assets .

There are various ways that Save the Children could continue to contribute, given the necessary funding. For instance, those still in emergency shelters could be assisted; families in Pottuvil could be provided with the toilets and wells they did not receive earlier because of the advent of monsoons. Another area that can be built upon is the further development of existing Save the Children in Sri Lanka-supported transitional shelters where these are on the occupants' own land. This would mean making these houses into more viable permanent structures without necessarily entering the highly politicized permanent housing domain (calling them 'semi-permanent' is one option). Given the uncertainty of the permanent housing process, especially for those from the contested buffer zone area, this could provide an alternative to resettlement in the event that other forms of compensation fail to materialize. The existing shelters cost USD 560. Another such sum could in theory double the size of the structure. Twice that much could probably allow for both enlarging and upgrading the houses. There are numerous possibilities for supporting the economical development of more workable homes for people through this approach.

The most valuable approach, if funds could be made available, would be to allow households and communities to decide for themselves how best to use the available resources and for Save the Children in Sri Lanka and partners to provide

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both the opportunity and the technical support, where necessary, to stretch the resources as far as possible. This recommendation is in keeping with UNHCR's stated objectives regarding transitional shelters. According to an agency representative in Sri Lanka, *"This should be the catalyst to enable beneficiaries to make the step change from dependency on external assistance, to self-management and self help, enabling and empowering displaced communities to understand and meet their own needs. Consequently improvements should generally be left to the initiative of the beneficiaries themselves"* (da Silva, 2005). It would also support the broader application of the Sphere minimum standards, which stress that shelter provided in response to disasters *"should support communal coping strategies, incorporating as much self sufficiency and self-management into the process as possible"* (Sphere project, 2004, p 208).

There are various ways in which the process could take place. The simplest might be a straightforward cash grant to individual households along with technical support. More complicated but far more valuable in terms of supporting on-going community structures and cooperation would be to follow something similar to USDO's structure and to deal financially with organised community groups rather than with individual households. This would allow a community-driven process to support individually-managed household solutions. There are a number of reasons for recommending such an approach:

- Cash grants should probably vary depending on the size and situation of families. (An unemployed widow with five dependents needs more support than a family with two children and a breadwinner.) But an organised community group might be best placed to assess the relative needs of its members in a transparent way. This would avoid mistrust and dissatisfaction that could result from an agency making these decisions.
- Organised community groups would be best placed to make decisions about the use and improvement of common space – and part of the funds available might be well allocated for this kind of common use.
- A community-based approach would reduce the transaction costs for Save the Children in Sri Lanka and partners in dealing directly with individual households.
- A community-based housing response would offer the best opportunity for building, giving better attention to children and their priorities with regard to their living space. Through awareness-raising campaigns for adults and staff and by building on such existing structures such as child clubs supported by USDO and others, it should be possible to engage children in a more practical way, especially in the upgrading of their community space over time. It would also be possible to encourage a more child-focused awareness on the part of adults.
- An organised community might be able to work out systems of mutual support that could stretch the funds further – for instance, developing ways to share labour or building skills for the benefit of all (for example, some people might learn plastering.)
- If a fund is made available for a community group to work with, there is a greater potential for developing some sort of revolving loan system, which could allow for available resources to be stretched still further. There are many excellent precedents for these kinds of community managed funds (ACHR, 2002, Satterthwaite, 2002).

- An organised community, with support from local NGOs and Save the Children in Sri Lanka, will be better able to continue to negotiate for any compensation that may be forthcoming from the government without just sitting and waiting for this eventuality.

There is also the potential for an arrangement like this to be more holistic than the post-tsunami assistance has been so far, integrated most obviously with livelihood strategies. But community groups organised initially around on-going housing development could also become involved over time in the strengthening of local schools, in disaster preparedness efforts and in the development and general rebuilding of the local area. There would be no particular need to limit these community groups to just those households that had received Save the Children transitional housing – in fact, broader-based involvement would facilitate more general community-based development.

Support for an effort like this would

- Continue to address the significant housing gaps that persist in Ampara;
- Build on the knowledge, connections and goodwill that Save the Children in Sri Lanka has developed through the 2005 transitional shelter project;
- Promote a model for integrated community-driven development in a district that has been plagued by poverty and been marginalized by the government;
- Allow for the opportunity to integrate attention to children into such development.

Immediate steps would include

- Deciding whether this is the most practical use of the capacity that Save the Children in Sri Lanka can currently bring to this area or whether, in fact, there is some greater need.
- If this does seem a practical approach, then identifying the number of households that might come under this category i.e. those in Save the Children-supported transitional shelter on their own land who have not made a commitment to resettlement;
- Determining whether there is the basis for a community-based approach to such a ‘semi-permanent’ housing approach. i.e. determining where the households in question are located relative to one another and relative to the catchment areas of the NGOs with strong support;
- Identifying the potential for funding such an effort;
- Working collaboratively with the stronger partner NGOs (e.g. Sweido Vision, USDO, UF) and some representative community members to develop a strategy for future projects.



ANNEXURE

ANNEX I

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ANNEX 2

Sphere minimum standards for shelter and settlement (from Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response)

The internationally accepted Sphere standards express the principles in the Humanitarian Charter, which focuses on the basic requirements of those affected by disaster or conflict. With regard to shelter there are 6 basic standards, which include within them a number of considerations. These are briefly summarized here.

Standard 1: Strategic planning

“Existing shelter and settlement solutions are prioritised through the return or hosting of disaster-affected households and the security, health, safety and wellbeing of the affected population are ensured.”

Affected households are supported to return wherever possible to the site of their original dwellings, with attention to necessary infrastructure and services. Collective settlements should not be the automatic response, but used where other alternatives do not work out.

Standard 2: Physical planning

“Local physical planning practices are used where possible, enabling safe and secure access to and use of shelters and essential services and facilities, as well as ensuring appropriate privacy and separation between individual household shelters.”

Planning should involve people, support existing social networks and focus on self-management. In collective settlements attention should be given to social practices and to the privacy and dignity of separate households. There should be safe access to all necessary facilities.

Standard 3: Covered living space

“People have sufficient covered space to provide dignified accommodation. Essential household activities can be satisfactorily undertaken and livelihood support activities can be pursued as required.”

Covered floor area should be at least 3.5 square metres per person and should allow privacy between sexes. Design should allow for flexible use of space to accommodate different activities and should allow for use of adjacent outdoor space.

Standard 4: Design

“The design of the shelter is acceptable to the affected population and provides sufficient thermal comfort, fresh air and protection from the climate to ensure their dignity, health, safety and wellbeing.”

Materials and design should be familiar and culturally acceptable. Materials and openings provide should provide optimal comfort and ventilation. Seasonal rains should be taken into account.

Standard 5: Construction

“The construction approach is in accordance with safe local building practices and maximises local livelihood opportunities.”

Locally sourced materials and labor should be used. Procurement of supplies and supervision should be transparent and accountable. Opportunities for affected people to contribute labor should be made available, with support and training where possible. The structure should be designed to withstand local climatic conditions (hurricanes, flooding, etc). The design should enable occupants to upgrade the shelter incrementally to meet longer term needs.

Standard 6: Environmental impact

“The adverse impact on the environment is minimised by the settling of the disaster-affected households, the material sourcing and construction techniques used.”

The natural resources of the area are managed to meet ongoing needs of the population. Construction methods and materials minimise depletion of natural resources. Trees and vegetation are retained where possible. Provision for drainage should minimise erosion.

A government (TAP)⁸ circular issued in March 2005 required that transitional shelters meet these UN standards and stipulated in addition that each unit should have a floor area of at least 200 sq. ft and a height of 6 to 8 feet.

⁸ TAP – or Transitional Accommodation Project – was established by the government Task Force for Relief (TAFOR) to coordinate emergency and transitional accommodation issues.

ANNEX 3

Transitional Housing Costs, Save the Children in Sri Lanka, 2005

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S.no.	Description	Qty	Unit	Rate	Amount
A- BRICK & BLOCK MASONRY					
A-1	Cement block.(16"X8"X4")	585.00	Nos	27.00	15,795.00
A-2	Bricks for foundation	914.00	Nos	4.10	3,747.40
B- ROOF FRAME IN CI. ITIMBER & COCONUTTIMBER					
B-1	3"x2" wall plate Coconut)	74.00	Lft	15.00	1,110.00
B-2	3"x2" Ridge plate Coconut)	22.00	Lft	15.00	330.00
B-3	3"x2" wall plate(Coconut)for kitchen	8.00	Lft	15.00	120.00
B-4	4"x2" Timber post in Cl.I timber	4.50	Lft	32.00	144.00
B-5	2"x2" Rafter(8' 6")in Cl. I timber	187.00	Lft	15.50	2,898.50
B-6	2"x2" Rafter for kitchen(7' 6")in Cl.I	22.50	Lft	15.50	348.75
B-7	2"x1" Purlin for kitchen(8' 0")	24.00	Lft	7.50	180.00
B-8	2"x1" Purlin	110.00	Lft	7.50	825.00
C- ROOF COVERING					
C-1	Cadjan(coconut)	195.00	Pairs	13.00	2,535.00
C-2	Corrugated tin sheet for kitchen(8'0")	64.00	Sqft	20.25	1,296.00
D- DOORSANDWINDOWS					
D-1	8",10"wide 1"thk.timber plank for doors and windows	42.00	Sqft	42.00	1,764.00
D-2	2"x2" reeper for door & window	23.00	Lft	15.50	356.50
D-3	3"x2" Timber for doors &window frames in Cl,I	55.00	Lft	25.00	1,375.00
D-4	2"x1" reeper for door rest	12.00	Lft	7.50	90.00
E- 2"x2" G.I.NET					
E-1	2"x2" G.I.net fixed on kitchen wall top	6.00	Sqft	25.50	153.00
E-2	2"x2" Reeper for fixing G.I. net	14.00	Lft	15.50	217.00
F- EARTHWORK					
F-1	Approved gravel filling under floor and compacted well	1.00	cub	1100.00	1,100.00
G - MISCELLANEOUS					
G-1	Cement	11.00	bags	540.00	5,940.00
G-2	River sand	2.50	Trac.load	1300.00	3,250.00
G-3	T/Hinges 8"	6.00	Nos	68.00	408.00
G-4	But Hinges 4"	4.00	Nos	51.00	204.00
G-5	Hasp & Staple 4"	2.00	Nos	33.00	66.00
G-6	Pad lock 1"	2.00	Nos	56.00	112.00
G-7	Tower Bolt 5"	2.00	Nos	53.00	106.00
G-8	Window Hook	2.00	nos	6.25	12.50
G-9	Nail	1.00	Kg	90.00	90.00
G-10	Cloud headed nail	15.00	Nos	1.50	22.50
G-11	Door Handle	2.00	Nos	37.00	74.00
J-Wages				Sum	11,600.00
				Total for one Shelter	56,270.15

This includes costs for transport of materials, loading and unloading.

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Save the Children fights for children's rights.
We deliver immediate and lasting improvements to children's lives worldwide.

Save the Children works for:

- a world which respects and values each child
- a world which listens to children and learns
- a world where all children have hope and opportunity



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