

Switzerland's commitment following the tsunami in Sri Lanka



The village of Kinniya in the Trincomalee district suffered the full brunt of the tsunami of 2004. Many houses were levelled to the ground. © SDC

Context

The end of 2014 will mark ten years since 26 December 2004, when a tsunami ravaged much of the coasts of South East Asia and Africa. The disaster claimed over 225,000 lives. Millions of people were affected in 13 countries along the coasts of the Indian Ocean, from Indonesia to Somalia. After the tsunami, the world witnessed a remarkable outpouring of solidarity with the victims. In Switzerland public and private donations totalled over CHF 300 million, a sum used to fund emergency aid and recovery programmes for tsunami victims in Thailand, India, Indonesia, Somalia and Sri Lanka.

Nearly 40% of Swiss donations benefited Sri Lanka. In this country alone, the enormous waves that ravaged coastal regions killed over 35,000 people. The inhabitants of battered cities and villages quickly organised to aid survivors, who initially found refuge in the homes of friends and relatives. This local response to the tsunami helped reduce the risk of epidemics and food shortages.

Little by little, most of the surviving families were placed in temporary shelters erected by humanitarian organisations before being assigned new housing. Many families received aid to rebuild their damaged homes. In the north and east of the country, housing and public infrastructure had already been in short supply before the tsunami due to fighting between the government and Tamil rebels.

SDC emergency aid

The SDC responded as soon as news of the disaster emerged. Staff at the SDC's two offices in Colombo and Jaffna distributed emergency aid to victims in the form of locally purchased necessities such as blankets, groceries and cookware. The SDC also made contributions to UNICEF, the HCR and the ICRC, its traditional multilateral partners, in support of their operations.

Once the Sri Lankan government had agreed to accept international aid, the SDC deployed 57 Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit (SHA) experts to the crisis zones. SHA workers assessed needs and helped distribute emergency aid and upgrade crisis management systems for local authorities and UN agencies in the field. SHA experts were also seconded to the HCR and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). The SDC devoted a total of CHF 5 million to the emergency aid phase in Sri Lanka.

Rebuilding schools

Immediately after the tsunami the SDC became involved in rehabilitating 60 temporary classrooms so that over 2,400 pupils could continue their education in the Matara district.

In collaboration with the Sri Lankan Ministry of Education, the SDC next launched a permanent school reconstruction programme in the same region.



Schoolgirls in class at one of the rebuilt schools in Sumangala, Matara district. © SDC

The SDC carried out a portion of this work itself with the support of SHA experts. The rest of the work was undertaken in coordination with Swiss Solidarity and Swiss Church Aid (HEKS). With a budget of CHF 7.9 million, the programme resulted in five schools being rebuilt to serve over 6,000 pupils. Ten years after the tsunami, the rebuilt schools are still in operation.

For its part, the SDC office in Jaffna undertook the rehabilitation of Hartley College in Point Pedro in the north of the Jaffna peninsula. Already damaged in the fighting, the

college had been almost entirely destroyed by the tsunami.

Finally, upon request of the UNICEF office in Sri Lanka, the SDC placed two HSA construction experts at the UN agency's disposal. These experts assisted UNICEF in its school rehabilitation programme in the country's south and east, where they oversaw construction of 12 schools to serve over 9,200 pupils.

The "Cash" programme for rehabilitation and reconstruction of homes

During the country's rebuilding phase, the Sri Lankan government designated exclusion zones near the coast where all new construction was prohibited, with the aim of resettling owners of ruined houses in safer locations.

The Sri Lankan authorities launched a rebuilding programme known as Cash for Rehabilitation and Reconstruction. A key aspect of the programme was direct involvement of the beneficiaries, with financial aid granted to families being resettled so that they could repair and rebuild their own homes according to their own specific needs.



Families were able to rebuild their homes as they saw fit. © SDC

Each eligible family received a total of USD 1,000 for a damaged home or USD 2,500 for one that had been totally destroyed. Funds were disbursed in instalments as work progressed. The financial aid enabled homeowners to buy building materials on the local market. The Cash programme was designed to further several objectives:

- help families cope with post-tsunami trauma by involving them actively in the rebuilding process
- strengthen and rebuild the communities hit by the tsunami
- inject funds to help restore the local socioeconomic fabric

Upon request of the government of Sri Lanka, four Swiss organisations — the SDC, the Swiss Red Cross, HEKS and Swiss Solidarity — joined forces starting in 2005 to support the Cash programme in the districts of Trincomalee and Matara. The consortium provided expertise to the Sri Lankans along with a total of CHF 19.5 million in funding for the two districts.

In December 2007, three years after the tsunami, the consortium concluded its efforts in Trincomalee and Matara after having completed the rehabilitation programme. A total of 10,500 houses had been repaired or rebuilt, meeting 10% of the country's housing needs after the tsunami. The experience later proved decisive when

the SDC initiated a new housing reconstruction programme following a new wave of conflict that swept the country's north in 2009.

Facts and figures

CHF 15,440,000: total SDC budget for tsunami response in Sri Lanka

57 members of Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit deployed

18 schools rebuilt (SDC)

10,500 homes repaired or rebuilt (Swiss consortium)

The importance of having a home

Living together under the same roof is essential to a family's wellbeing. The destruction of a house in a disaster or conflict has a devastating impact on the economic and social circumstances of the people affected. Thus reconstruction programmes have been a top response priority, both during the post-tsunami repair phase and in the SDC's longer-term involvement in Sri Lanka. Experience has shown the strategic importance of involving local communities from the start and of studying the social, political and economic dynamics at work in order to respond to needs in a way that makes a lasting difference.



Additional information

Swiss Cooperation Programme Office

138/4 & 5, Kynsey Road, Colombo 8, Sri Lanka

Tel. + 94 11 268 8347

Fax + 94 11 268 8348

Email: colombo@eda.admin.ch

<http://www.swiss-cooperation.admin.ch/srilanka/>