

## **Rising above the waters, together we swim.....**

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This is a story of how tsunami survivors took the lead to provide emergency relief to the flood affected peoples in Poovalai village, Tamil Nadu, India nine months after they had experienced one.

Sasikala, Mari and Janaki waded through three feet deep water for many hours covering 15-18 km, their bodies half submerged, holding hands, avoiding potholes, evading water snakes and creepers. It was a dangerous trek, but they continued till they reached Poovalai village, one of the worst affected in the heavy rains and floods that hit Tamil Nadu, India in November, 2005. (The same villages were hit by the tsunami in December 2004).

These women leaders belonging to self help groups from Pudupettai and Indira Nagar neighbouring villages went against advice of men folk who warned them that the villages were marooned and the walk, dangerous. But these tsunami survivors knew what it took to take control of their lives in the wake of a disaster. "When the tsunami struck, people from outside helped us rebuild our lives. We decided it was time to act quickly and help our neighbours in whatever way we could," they said.

### **Reaching Out....**

#### **Initiatives**

On their return from the flood hit village, an urgent meeting with over 250 women from Pudupettai and Indira Nagar villages was held to review and plan for next steps. Sasikala's appeal was "If we found it so difficult to even visit the villages, imagine the plight of the villagers who live there!" Her appeal went to the heart and everyone present decided to contribute Rs. 400 (US \$ 8) from each self help group to purchase rice; vegetables and necessary materials prepared and packed 650 food packets. Women took turns to ensure that that the food grains purchased were properly accounted and distributed and that no one was left out. Only when the women could not access places did they ask for help. The youth team and the men folk helped them by using boats to distribute the food. It turned out to be a well-coordinated relief effort.

After this initiative led by women, many youngsters followed to help rescue the old, disabled and children. They continued working in the villages distributed biscuits and water packets for another week. After the initial day of food distribution, they ran out of resources. Women leaders said, "We decided to collect donations again from the villagers. This contribution was used for purchase of rice, oil, vegetables and fish, which were distributed among them. This activity continued for another four to five days."

### **And these initiatives spread.....**

When another village, flooded heavily, people from Pudukuppam rescued them by using boats. In villages like Puduchatram, men distributed relief materials in boats.

"We have also suffered a lot in the tsunami. People came and helped us during the crisis. Our conscience tells us that we should also do something for the people who are suffering in a similar situation," Sasikala maintained.

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