

# Corporate Conscience

*To many, the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) is just a business lobby group. But in the last few years, the CII has broad-based its profile to contribute to relief and rehabilitation work in disaster-hit areas. Narun Das, chief mentor of the CII, tells N Vidyasagar and Amrith Lal about the organisation's efforts in areas ravaged by the tsunami.*

**How is the CII engaged with relief and rehabilitation work in tsunami-hit areas?**

The first thing we did when we heard of the devastation was to send relief material like clothing and medicine to tsunami-hit areas. We started by focusing on Tamil Nadu. We have sent relief material to Cuddalore, Nagapattinam and Pondicherry. Our task force is headquartered in Chennai. That apart, we are trying to work out something which is unique and sustainable. In Kutch, we rebuilt schools for the quake-affected. We built community halls and a shared village infrastructure emerged.

**Do you have similar plans in Tamil Nadu?**

One thing we are looking at is the fishing industry. We also met the finance minister and discussed about this. This is no doubt a tragedy, but how can we turn this into an opportunity. How can we help the people to build a modern fishing industry? How can they have better quality boats, better harbours. We found that wherever there were big rocks on the coastline, the damage was much less. The waves crashed against the rocks. The industry is thinking of building heavy concrete rocks so that in future, if there was something like this, there would be protection. We want to do something unique, sustainable. We are telling ourselves that rehabilitation is a long-term project. In the 23 villages in Kutch where we worked, most of the people were artisans and craftspeople. We have created, in partnership with local NGOs, a craft resource centre—I would call this Centre of Excellence for Crafts. In the coastal belt of Tamil Nadu, we are thinking of building something related to fishing.

**How do you work?**

We are there to work with the official agencies. We are in touch with relief commissioners. Corporate India wants to be a junior partner with the government in rehabilitation work. We have also decided to work with NGO partners. We want local NGOs who know the language and local culture to guide us. We have to be sensitive to local environment and their preferences. We are working more in Tamil Nadu and Andaman and Nicobar but our relief work is also on in Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. We are collecting relief funds and money is coming.

*People are sceptical about donations.*

*They fear money will not reach the needy.*

What we did in Kutch was to say that 'this village was reconstructed with your money'. We want to connect the money with the project. It is just to send a message that it was not wasted. We must account for the donor for every rupee that is spent.

**The tsunami has destroyed infrastructure built over the years. How do we rebuild them?**

A lot of the resources would come from the government. They have weaknesses in their delivery system. That is because they have a short-gun approach. We will like to have more of a rifle-shot approach. We have a good micro-finance project in CII where we give a small amount to the disadvantaged to start business. We help them in getting more money from banks by using our credibility as an institution. But most importantly, we provide a mentor. Each person that we have assisted in the last 10 years, has had a mentor who helped that person develop the business. Many disadvantaged women we helped 10 years ago are millionaires today. They don't speak English. But they are employing a number of people today. We want to replicate that in Tamil Nadu, especially with women.

**What kind of response have you got from CII associates?**

## Q&A

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Uday Shankar

Companies are pooling to provide aid. The outpouring of response is tremendous. My friend from London called and said his daughter is working in an NGO in Kazakhstan and she wants to go and work in Tamil Nadu. Tremendous response has been coming from all over the place. From all this would emerge an organisational structure which we can put to use for ourselves as well as for other nations. The most important thing we want to do is to create a centre of excellence in disaster management. We can play a part in building knowledge, training people, sharing expertise, putting up a website to create consciousness on disaster management.

**People who have been affected by disasters are quite sensitive to the sort of aid they receive. They don't want to be treated as beggars. How do we handle it?**

This is very important. For example, in the south, they don't want second-hand clothes. They want new clothes. There is a sense of pride. Even the poorest person has some pride and self-respect. We have to respect that. We will be sensitive to that. We are buying new clothes, utensils.

When people are down, they are more sensitive. We need professional counsellors. We faced a lot of problems in Kutch because we had never done rehabilitation work before. We didn't know how to deal with people. We have learnt from our mistakes.