

Role of INCOIS-MSSRF Helpline Services in the Lives of Fishermen: Case Studies from Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh

INCOIS





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Introduction

Three fishermen who went missing were rescued from the sea with the help of Indian Coast Guard. These fishermen owe it to the Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services (INCOIS) and MS Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF).

The role of INCOIS-MSSRF fisheries helpline service can be understood by the description of the incident which happened on 26.8.2012 in Mandapam region of Ramanathapuram District. Like any other day, fishermen namely Mr Kannan, Mr Muniyappan and Mr Selvam went for fishing from Mandapam village. While all the other fishermen who ventured into the sea for fishing on that particular day from the same village returned to the shore the three fishermen did not return. The families of three fishermen and friends became anxious when they did not reach the shore even after two days. On the third day, the relatives of missing fishermen contacted Assistant Director of Fisheries and Coast Guard station at Mandapam. As there was no response from the contacted officials the relatives of those missing people contacted INCOIS-MSSRF fisheries helpline (9282442311) around 8 in the morning to do needful. There was a fear that they might have been taken into custody by Sri Lankan navy.

Mr. Sahaya Pradeep from MSSRF fisheries help line operator continuously tried the mobile number of fisher folk who were lost in the sea and finally was able to speak to one of them. It was figured out that the fishermen drifted near Kodiyakarai coast with the depth of five meters. Pradeep at once (around 8.30 AM) passed on the information to Ms. Velvizhi, Nagapattinam Cluster Coordinator of MSSRF who immediately got in touch with the Coast Guard. While Mr Pradeep continuously tried the mobile number of the missing men and got the exact position of the boat, simultaneously Ms Velvizhi coordinated with higher officials of Coast guard, Mandapam and Chennai and sent a message of the details of boat and phone numbers and their drifted distance etc. Around 1 PM in the afternoon MSSRF received a call from Coast Guard, Mandapam that they had sent a coast guard boat to the place mentioned and they requested the staff of MSSRF to inform the fisher folks in the boat to switch on the mobile for easy recovery. Around 6 in the evening, the Coast guard identified the boat and the fishermen were rescued. Around 9 in the night MSSRF received a call from the fishers they reached the shore safely. They thanked the MSSRF for their valuable support.

Many such real life stories have been possible, thanks to the partnership between MSSRF and INCOIS.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has largely been recognised as a technological tool that can serve as a catalytic intervention in improving the lives and livelihoods of rural families. For over two decades M S Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) has been in the forefront in taking ICT enabled development activities to the rural communities through Village Resource Centres (VRCs) and Village Knowledge Centres (VKCs). In 2003, most of the activities were brought under the aegis of the Jamsetji National Virtual Academy. The VRCs and the VKCs use traditional as well as modern technologies to provide information/knowledge to rural women and men with an objective to improve their socioeconomic lives.

MSSRF in partnership with various organisations and institutions has been carrying activities that help build the capacities of rural communities. One of the most significant interventions carried out by MSSRF, since 2009, is in partnership with Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services (INCOIS). This intervention involves primarily disseminating Potential Fishing Zone and Ocean State Forecast information to fishers of selected fishing villages in the states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Union Territory of Puducherry. The project initially targeted 40 fishing villages across eight districts in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry. Subsequently, the services have been taken to the fishermen of Andhra Pradesh too. This has now grown to reach nearly 225 fishing villages in 14 coastal districts in three coastal states. The districts covered under this project are Cuddalore, Nagapattinam, Thanjavur, Pudukkottai, Ramanathapuram, Tuticorin, Tirunelveli and Kanniyakumari in Tamil Nadu, East Godavari, Krishna and Guntur in Andhra Pradesh and Puducherry, Karaikal and Yanam in the Union Territory of Puducherry. This is due to overwhelming demand from the fishing community. Presently, more than 10000 fisher folks from 14 coastal districts are aware of INCOIS services and are receiving locale specific scientific forecast services such as Ocean State Forecast (OSF), Potential Fishing Zone (PFZ), and early warning information. The information generated at INCOIS is disseminated through various communication technologies such as Mobile based voice and text messages, GSM based Public Address Systems, INCOIS Electronic Display Board (EDB), Notice Board, Wireless Local Loop, FM radio and the Village Knowledge Centers located across the coastal villages. These services aim at enabling them to take critical decisions and help improve their livelihood and ensure safety while fishing in the sea.

In order to support and strengthen the audio and text advisories and also to access the fisheries services of INCOIS and MSSRF at any time of the day (for the coastal fishermen of Tamil Nadu, Union Territory of Puducherry and Andhra Pradesh) a new initiative, namely, INCOIS-MSSRF Fisheries Helpline Service, has been launched by MSSRF in partnership with INCOIS on the 7th of August, 2011. This is the first of its kind in India.

The helpline is a 24 /7 services (9282442311 or 9282442312 -Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, 7569059856 or 7569079047- Andhra Pradesh) where fisher folk can contact the number at any time of the day to get information such as Potential Fishing Zones, Ocean State forecast, early warning, marine conservation, fisheries schemes and entitlements, emergency relief etc. The helpline service is operational across Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Andhra Pradesh coast. A panel of experts belonging to academia, fisheries research institutes, Government officials and regulators have been empanelled virtually and are connected at regular intervals to answer to the queries of the fisher folk. Other than regular services, INCOIS-MSSRF Fisheries help line played a crucial role to disseminate the timely and updated information about cyclone, high waves, Tsunami and heavy rain fall situation during emergency and disaster situations to the registered callers through audio and text advisories. . Apart from this, efforts are taken to address various other questions constantly posed by fisher folk through the helpline. Special efforts have been taken for creating awareness on help line services to the fishing villages. Stickers and posters were developed and distributed to all the coastal villages including major landing centres. Awareness meetings were also organised to explain about the help line services in fishing villages.

The helpline played a major role during emergency and disaster situations and acted as a nodal point of communication for fisher folk situations such as the Earth Quake in Indonesia on April 11, 2012. During the Tsunami warning on April 11th alert was raised by tsunami early warning centre at INCOIS, Hyderabad; the INCOIS-MSSRF helpline was accessed by more than 350 fisher folk to get status of Tsunami and the probable time of occurrence in the Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Andhra Pradesh coast. Similarly, help line played a significant role recently when cyclone *Neelam* (between the 29th and 31st of September 2012) hit Tamil Nadu and Puducherry. It acted as a nodal point for communicating disaster alerts to fishers giving high wave alerts and *Neelam* cyclone effects. Regular updates about various details of cyclone *Neelam* was provided to the coastal communities and others also through helpline. It was almost round the clock activity for the VRC staff. Many contacted the helpline from different districts of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Union Territory of Puducherry during this period. The general queries during the normal days usually are related to wind speed, wave height, and wind direction, potential fishing zone and weather information. The vital support enabled the fishers to take appropriate and timely decisions to safeguard their life and livelihood assets. Till date around 5500 fisher folk across Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Andhra Pradesh have accessed the helpline services. The fishermen normally contact the helpline whenever they need any clarifications and also to reconfirm the information on early warning and forecast received by them through text or voice SMS.

Name: Antony
Age: 28
Type of Boat: Vallam
Village: Kolachal
District: Kanyakumari
State: Tamil Nadu
Mobile: 9751669017

I am Antony living in Kolachel village, Kanyakumari district. I hail from traditional fishing family. I have studied up to Class 3. I have been engaging in fishing for the past 16 years. I came to know about fisheries helpline service from one of my friend namely Mr Subin, who has been utilising this service for the past 10 months. I also registered my mobile number during November 2012 for receiving OSF and PFZ information as audio advisories. They are quite useful and I plan my fishing activity accordingly. However, I make use of helpline service particularly when we go for day-night fishing. I call help line number even at 2 am in the morning in order to know and confirm about existing status of OSF such as wind speed, direction and wave height. It acts as guidance and helps to undertake fishing with confidence.

I would like to mention about an incident which happened recently i.e during mid February 2013. On that particular day while my fishing team members and I were in the sea, we suddenly experienced a cyclone like weather conditions and we witnessed long waves.

We became anxious; I immediately remembered about Helpline and got in touch with the staff from MSSRF handling this particular service. He was kind enough to tell us that it was only a swell and not to worry about it. The staff further explained that this was due to cyclone in Madagascar which reflected as long waves in this part of the sea. We are blessed to have this facility; we can contact them any time of the day and also during night. Thus this service plays a significant role in our lives; it enables my team and me to proceed for fishing activity without any fear and it also gives us the confidence that we will get back to shore without any difficulty. We can save our lives and protect our fishing materials. My grandfather often says that during their fishing days they did not have such facilities of receiving prior forecast information. He says that the present generation is fortunate to have these facilities and he is happy about MSSRF and INCOIS providing this scientific local specific information at the right time.

Name: Britto
Age: 21
Type of Boat: Vallam
Village: Manakudi
District: Kanyakumari
State: Tamil Nadu
Mobile: 8300126180

I am Britto, 21 years old. I have studied up to Class 8. We have traditionally been involved in fishing for our livelihood. I own a *vallam*. One year ago, MSSRF conducted awareness programme about fisheries related activities in our village. Through that programme, I came to know about INCOIS- MSSRF Fisheries helpline service available for fisher folk. Since then I developed interest in getting the services of MSSRF. I feel it is very useful for our fishing activity. Today, I am enjoying the benefits of the helpline. I contact helpline whenever I have doubts on wave height, wind speed and direction. This information is very valuable and helps us to plan our fishing activity. I will not risk going into the sea when the sea is rough and wind speed is above normal.

We are able to avoid loss of life and damage to boats/nets. Sometimes during Sundays I do not get audio advisory or text SMS; I contact helpline to get information on such days. Recently in a neighboring village three fishermen ventured into the sea but they could not return to the shore due to heavy wind speed and rough weather condition on that day without knowing that the wind speed was high i.e. above 45 kilo metres per hour.

Whereas, on that particular day I called the help line to know about the weather forecast for that day I was told that wind speed would be very high above 45 kilo metres per hour. So myself and other fishermen in our village remained on the shore. They lost their lives. This loss cannot be compensated by anyone by any means. Those fishermen from our neighbouring village might not have gone for fishing if they too had the facility of receiving information. Precious human lives have been lost due to lack of proper information!

By providing OSF and PFZ information, MSSRF in collaboration with INCOIS is doing a great service to the fishing community. We will be very grateful if INCOIS & MSSRF provide topography sheet, sea current information for further improvement in the day to day fishing activity.

Name: Britton

Age: 40

Type of Boat: Fibre Boat

Village: Kootapuli

District: Tirunelveli

State: Tamil Nadu

Mobile: 9788931903

I am Britton living in Kudankulam village of Tirunelveli District. I have studied up to Class 10. I am a fisherman with over twenty year's experience. I own a fibre boat. About one year ago, I came to know about the fishermen help line facility operated by MSSRF (with the support of INCOIS) from my friend who lives in Manakudi, a nearby fishing village. I learnt that we can contact this help line number for any emergency or information related to our fishing activity. Ever since I got the number I started using this facility and soon experienced its benefits.

I regularly make use of helpline service while going for fishing. I decide my day's work based on the information I get from the help line service. For example, if the wind speed is beyond 45 km per hour I will not venture into the sea for fishing. It is not safe for a fisherman to go for fishing in such conditions. We will be careful on such days. This information saves my life and my fishing assets. I also get phone calls from help line to inform me about any variations in the weather and climatic conditions. I value the wind speed and wave height alert calls from help line which I immediately share with my friends and relatives; so that they will also be careful about going into the sea.

I feel 98% of the forecast is accurate and sometimes there is very slight variation. The information provided by INCOIS and MSSRF is on time and more accurate.

I receive PFZ information also, but I could not use it in the current season due to high wind speed (35 Kmph) as I own fibre boat in which I can go only up to 25 nautical miles. If the same PFZ information is provided during the month of April it would be beneficial for getting more catch. After April the wind direction changes which will be favourable for deep sea fishing. It would be useful for fishermen if information on surface sea current is also provided.

In my district more than twenty villages depend on fishing for livelihood. Most of them venture into sea during morning hours. At present a majority of them are not aware of this service. I have heard about fishermen living in other fishing villages receiving audio advisories on wave height, wind speed and direction and Potential fishing zone. If this information is disseminated through short voice or text messages to our village and other nearby fishing villages, it will be very useful. Two days ago (in the last week of January 2013) three members from a neighbouring village who had gone for fishing have not reached the shore as the wind speed was much more than the usual speed. They might have probably got caught in the ocean and are unable to return. They would not have gone into the sea had they known about the high wind speed earlier!

Name: Ennachi
Age: 50
Type of Boat: Fibre Boat
Village: Thangachimadam
District: Ramanathapuram
State: Tamil Nadu
Mobile: 8807779587

I am Ennachi from Thangachimadam. I am 50 years of age and I have studied up to Class 3. I belong to traditional fishing family. I came to know about Fisheries Helpline facility from Mr. Palani, who is my friend and neighbour. I call fisheries helpline to get information related to wave height, wind speed, rainfall. I feel information from fisheries helpline is accurate and useful to decide whether to go for fishing or not. When there is any change in sea conditions or weather, we immediately call helpline. This gives us a sense of security and confidence to plan the fishing activity accordingly. The information provided is accurate and I share this with my friends and relatives.

Earlier we used to depend more on traditional knowledge and never used to pay much attention to the early warning and forecasting information given by AD Fisheries. Of late, once we started receiving the advisories from MSSRF, we realize the importance of scientific information. Traditional knowledge was useful only to predict the current sea condition but not the future weather conditions. Our traditional knowledge backed by scientific information makes us feel more secure and confident these days.

After I started using helpline number, we do not depend on others just like we consult a doctor for health problems, we contact fisheries helpline to secure our lives and improve our economic conditions. We are encouraged to undertake our fishing activity without fear or anxiety due to the availability of right information.

Name: Joseph Antony
Age: 42
Type of Boat: Labourer in Catamaran
Village: Kadiyapattinam
District: Kanyakumari
State: Tamil Nadu
Mobile : 9790265295

I am Joseph Antony residing in Kadiyapattinam, Kanyakumari district. I have studied up to Class 8. I have been working as a labourer in catamaran boat for the past 15 years. In our village, awareness meeting was conducted by MSSRF on Helpline service and provided the contact number for further use. Through this meeting I came to know about Helpline service. I used to call helpline whenever I need clarifications regarding audio advisories I receive. We are fortunate to have been provided with the helpline service.

In this context I would like to share with you an incident which brings out the important role played by helpline service in the lives of fishermen. A friend of mine by name Paulos had set out for fishing alone by catamaran on 10, February, 2013 around six in the evening. But he did not reach the shore the following day even after six in the morning which is his usual time of return. His relatives called me to enquire whether I knew any details about him. I immediately called the INCOIS-MSSRF fisheries helpline (11th February) to trace and rescue him. MSSRF staff handling Helpline service called AD fisheries and

Coastal Police to inform about the missing person. In the mean time, I along with two of my friends by using catamaran went up to 10 kilo metres in search of him. But we could not locate him and as the sea current was high we decided to return to the shore. But to our relief, received call from helpline informing me that the missing person had drifted 40 Km away from the shore. I came to know that MSSRF received this information from coastal police and AD fisheries. Immediately, another three of my friends took a fibre boat. It was great relief when they sighted him and brought him back to the shore without any physical injury around six on the evening of 12, February. I earnestly feel that during such times helpline does a great service to the fishermen in saving the lives and giving relief to the families concerned

Name: Kuttiyandi**Age: 27****Type of Boat: Fibre Boat****Village: Nagore****District: Nagapattinam****State: Tamil Nadu****Mobile : 09247371752**

I am Kuttiyandi living in Nagore, Nagapattinam District. I hail from a traditional fishing family. I am 27 years old and I have studied up to Class 10. I have been engaged in fishing for the past nine years. I am using helpline service since April 2012; before that I was not aware of this service. I came to know of this from fellow fisher folk of my village.

I also receive audio advisories from MSSRF. Earlier, (before I started receiving the advisories) on three occasions I called fisheries helpline number and asked for PFZ data. The latitude and longitude information, depth (15-18m) direction was given. On those days, I got good catch of fish and profit of nearly Rs 14,000/- and Rs 20,000/-. Normally, I used to get profit between Rs 5000 to 10,000/- only.

Though I get audio advisories I make use of helpline service particularly when we set out for day-night fishing. I call the help line during night hours also i.e. around 2 AM, to know and confirm about prevailing status of wind speed and wave height. This information is very crucial for our livelihood. We can save our lives and protect our fishing assets. I would like to tell you about an incident that occurred last year (2012). When we had gone for

fishing we got caught in the sea due to heavy wind speed near Kodiyakarai coast. It was a dreadful experience; we did not think we would return to the shore. Somehow we reached the shore. While we were relieved to know that there was no human loss some of us were injured and there was an economic loss of few thousand rupees. Since then we are afraid of the sea. So to find out the current status of wind speed and wave height I call fisheries helpline. Because of this live information we are able to save fuel and food cost while venturing into sea for fishing. Whenever we receive information on high wind speed, we anchor our boats and place our nets safely.

On another occasion, when few of my friends were in the sea, the wave height was much more than the normal. They were afraid that it could be Tsunami. Somehow they were able to contact me and asked me to find out about the current sea condition. I immediately called fisheries help line and was relieved to know that it was not Tsunami and only a swell. I conveyed the message to my fisher folk friends and relieved them of the anxiety and fear.

All of us got information from INCOIS and MSSRF about the Cyclone *Neelam* one day before it struck. So we placed our fishing gears in a safe place. During that time I called helpline to know the timing of crossing of cyclone. We got the information that Nagai region would not be affected by it but advised us not to venture into the sea. Because of audio advisories and helpline services fisher folks like me feel very safe and secure these days.

Name Sivasankaran

Age: 48

Type of Boat: Trawler

Village: Samathanpettai

District: Nagapattinam

State: Tamil Nadu

Mobile: 9942464942

My name is Sivasankaran and hail from a village called Samathanpettai in Nagapattinam district. I own a trawler boat. I have been using the various services and participating in the activities of the MSSRF since 2006. I have participated in the training programmes and benefitted a lot. I must say the service provided by INCOIS and MSSRF through audio advisories and Help Line to the fishing community in this region is something remarkable.

I cannot forget the service rendered by MSSRF through help line during Neelam cyclone. Seven other fishermen and myself had a dreadful experience during Neelam cyclone. We went in seven boats. We were caught in the sea. We were scared as the wind speed was very high. We thought we would not be able to reach the shore. In that critical situation, we called MSSRF help line which in turn got in touch with MARG Karikal Private Port Limited. Fortunately, due to MSSRF efforts MARG gave space to land our boats in their port safely. Because of MSSRF- MARG support we are alive today and could save our boats; a boat costs Rs 30 to 40 lakhs.

Name: Chokka Prasad
Age: 35
Type of Boat: Fibre Boat
Village: Uppada
District: East Godavari
State: Andhra Pradesh
Mobile : 09247371752

I am Chokka Prasad from Uppada, a fishing village in East Godavari district. Fishermen's residential area is referred to as *petta* in this region; around 450 households live in this *petta*. In my *petta* around 100 members have been receiving audio advisories from MSSRF on Ocean State Forecast (OSF) and Potential Fishing Zone (PFZ). The information is useful for us to plan our day to day activities and also get reasonable fish catch.

During November, 2012 I did not receive voice SMS from MSSRF due to some technical problem. On those days when I went for fishing, I came back empty handed. On third day, I contacted fisheries helpline, then they gave me accurate PFZ points, and I got good catch of tuna fish worth Rs 50,000/-. As I felt happy about it, I called Mr Veerabhadra Rao, who handles fisheries helpline in MSSRF and told him about this catch. I do not normally receive audio messages if I go beyond 10 kilometers in the sea due to network problem.

So, on reaching the shore I contact the helpline number to get information on PFZ for the following day's fishing. A few days ago, I had contacted helpline for PFZ information and received the same. I did not harvest as much fish as expected; later I realised that the information I received was for deep sea fishing. I might have got a good catch if had I ventured into deep sea fishing that day!

Last month (January, 2013) I and my peers received calls from helpline about a missing INCOIS tag ID no. 111704. It seems that INCOIS gave the information that the tag popped up and appeared that it might have been caught by some fishermen off Uppada. We took serious efforts and searched the entire sea shore from Subammapeta to Uppada. But we didn't find that tag. We called Mr Veerabhadra Rao and informed him about it.

Name: Chokka Venkateswaralu

Age: 50

Boat: Fibre Boat

Village: Uppada

District: East Godavari

State: Andhra Pradesh

Mobile: 08179742536

I am Chokka Venkateswaralu, I am fifty years old and have studied up to Standard 7. I hail from Uppada village of East Godavari District. I am the Union leader for Boat Owners' Association. In our Panchayat around 15,000 members are eligible to vote in elections. I reside in Nayakar colony, where all the members are related to each other. I have been fishing for the past 30 years.

From our village, some fishermen including myself had an opportunity to visit INCOIS, located in Hyderabad. Nearly one year ago, we came to know fisheries helpline number through MSSRF. It is really a boon to have this helpline number with its life saving facility; our lives, fishing boats and gears are saved to great extent because of this service.

I came to know about MSSRF and its activities through Mr Chittibabu (former MSSRF staff) and Dhanaraju (MSSRF staff). Through MSSRF we got awareness and training on GPS. With their support and guidance some of the fisher folks from my colony bought GPS at subsidized rate. By using GPS, we are able to save our time and fuel. Drifting into the sea has been avoided; we do not miss the direction for future fish catch.

We receive audio advisories daily around 4 PM in Telugu. When we started getting audio advisories we felt it was something great for improving our livelihood as we could experience its benefits. However, we feel help line plays a critical role in our lives mainly when there is weather uncertainty. For instance, during Neelam cyclone, we were wondering and quite confused whether we could go for fishing or not. We immediately called helpline to get the details of wave height, wind speed and its direction which helped us to take a decision.

I would like to share another important event. During Thane cyclone, some of our fishermen without knowing the sea conditions ventured into sea, but I stayed back since I had received audio advisory that wind speed and wave height will be on the higher side than the normal days. I then called my friends who had ventured into sea that day and told them about intensified sea conditions. This information brought the fishermen safely to the shore. I contact Helpline number often to know about the PFZ values; I find this information very helpful in locating Tuna fish shoals; the good catch provides great economic profit. I am very much thankful to MSSRF & INCOIS for providing this wonderful life-saving service.

Name: Veera Raghavaiah
Age: 47
Type of Boat: Fibre Boat
Village: Giripuram
District: Krishna
State: Andhra Pradesh
Mobile: 09705812269

I am Veera Raghavaiah and I am 47 years old. I come from Giripuram village, Krishna district. I have studied up to Class 5. I started to go for fishing at an early age; I have been engaging in fishing for the past 32 years. I own a fibre boat. Since 2002, I have been participating in mangrove conservation and restoration activities conducted by the VRC of MSSRF in Machilipatnam.

Nearly 14 months ago the VRC conducted awareness creation on INCOIS services (OSF and PFZ) and helpline service. Through this meeting I understood the necessity of getting this timely information and the utility of help line service for the fishermen. So, I immediately decided to register my mobile number for receiving text SMS. MSSRF also explained in detail about the importance of helpline number; we were told that helpline service is available through out for the fishermen and that we can call helpline at any time during the day and also during night.

I do not hesitate to call helpline service particularly whenever I get doubt regarding OSF information because it is important for a fisher man to plan his fishing activity.

Similarly, when PFZ information received though text SMS indicates the distance is long from the landing centre I call the helpline to clarify whether it is available for shorter distance also. I contact helpline number if I need any information related to rainfall or to get other details like insurance schemes for fisherman. No doubt the text SMS service is of great use to the fishing community. But, I find helpline very supportive and valuable; we can cross check the advisories provided through the text SMS. The advantage of this helpline service is that any one can access this service to know anything related to fisheries.

The INCOIS-MSSRF service plays a very crucial role in building the capacity of the fishermen for a better livelihood. This enables us to venture into the sea with confidence to a greater extent. I feel that possibility of getting affected due to high wave or wind is less now a days. We are thankful to MSSRF and INCOIS for providing these services.





Contributions of the following persons have been enabled this document to be published

Nagapattinam

Ms. S Velvizhi, Mr. A Ramesh Kumar

Nagercoil

Mr. E Anith Baylis

Kakinada

Mr. N Veerabhadra Rao

Our special thanks to our respondents for giving their valuable time and sharing their experiences

