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WHAT THE WORLD CAN LEARN FROM SRI LANKA'S POST-TSUNAMI EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

When the tsunami devastated communities along two-thirds of Sri Lanka's coast at the end of 2004, the national community rallied impressively and, for a brief period, there was an opportunity to turn a fragile "ceasefire" agreement into an enduring peace settlement. That opportunity was wasted and underlying weaknesses in governance have bedevilled the recovery process. The world must learn from Sri Lanka's difficult experience.

INTRODUCTION

After Aceh in Indonesia, Sri Lanka suffered the worst impacts of the December 2004 tsunami. It took almost a year to compile accurate figures on what was lost but the final tally made by the Sri Lankan government was that 35,322 people died, a further 516,150 lost their homes, 65,275 homes were totally destroyed and a further 38,561 were partially destroyed.[1] In the weeks and months following the tsunami, the Sri Lankan civil society did a remarkable job in coming to the aid of the victims. Those who survived the waves, volunteers from Colombo, and international aid workers took quick action to collect the bodies, get everyone into temporary shelter, provide fresh drinking water, repair damaged roads and mangled bridges, and clear the debris. People went house to house in Colombo to collect donations of food, clothes and medicine, and television studios and the national film school in Colombo became the clearing houses for such donations. Privately owned trucks were made available and they left – loaded with donations and volunteers – for the south and the east. Most people assumed that the mangled railway line that had connected Colombo to the south would take years to repair yet it was made operational again within months.

[1] Figures compiled by the Sri Lankan government were made available through the office of the United Nations Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery, www.tsunamispecialenvoy.org/.

Volunteers from around the world rushed to Sri Lanka and other countries impacted by the tsunami to help out. A leader of the post-tsunami recovery effort in the badly affected town of Hambantota, Azmi Thassim, later reported that such volunteers included a few teams of highly organized and professional people who knew exactly what to do without getting in the way of the locals.[2] However, he stressed that many of the volunteer "experts", however well-meaning they may have been, expected overworked locals to make the necessary arrangements for them to offer their services and, as such, they were more trouble than they were worth. One writer even suggested that the airfares and *per diems* used to support young and inexperienced volunteers who could not speak local languages might have been better used to build temporary houses (Rajasingam-Senanayake 2005).

There is no doubt that the world community responded swiftly and generously to this unprecedented natural disaster. Many governments pledged large grants and concessional loans and people all over the world – as individuals or groups – found ways to channel money or supplies to those affected. By the end of 2005 the Sri Lankan government had received $93 million in grants for tsunami reconstruction projects and other contributions were made through NGOs or through direct contacts (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2006). There was a rather unedifying spectacle of international NGOs competing with each other to promote their effectiveness as aid providers and stories abounded about some families getting more than they needed while others got nothing. In the Galle District, for example, it took nearly six months to establish effective coordination of the relief effort and to put in place a fair process for properly assessing needs.[3] Increasingly, the aid "industry" operates according to principles of market economics and there was an extraordinary "branding" of donations given by governments and aid organizations, to the extent that some new housing developments were named by the donors. The chaos was made worse by the fact that Sri Lanka had no inkling of its vulnerability to such a destructive tsunami and there were no significant disaster plans in place in any of the affected areas. Azmi Thassim has expressed a fervent hope that other nations will learn from Sri Lanka's lack of preparation and from its successes and failures in dealing with such a

[2] Azmi Thassim discussed his memories of the tsunami recovery effort in Hambantota in an interview with Martin Mulligan conducted in Hambantota in December 2005. View transcript at www.communitysustainability.info/.

[3] According to the Director of the Livelihood Program of the Task Force for the Reconstruction of the Nation (TAFREN) in the Galle District, Dr. Nanayakara, who was interviewed by Martin Mulligan in January 2006.

widespread disaster.[4] This seems a timely call in view of the gathering impacts of climate change. However, mistakes can easily be made even when the desire to help those in need is genuine. It soon became apparent, for example, that political interference and a lack of public sector capacity would reduce the effectiveness of aid channelled through the Sri Lankan national government. At the same time, ad hoc aid given directly to local communities can undermine the capacity for local governance and reduce the pressure for improving governance and public sector capacity at the national level. Furthermore, this paper will argue that decisions made in the immediate aftermath of a disaster can have long-term implications for those who live in the affected communities.

In the case of Sri Lanka, the effective delivery of post-tsunami aid has been made much more difficult by a worsening of the violent civil conflict between the national government and its armed forces, and those who have been campaigning for an independent Tamil homeland in the island's north and east for more than 20 years. At the time when the tsunami hit a rather fragile "ceasefire agreement" – brokered by Norway – had been in place for two years and efforts were being made to turn this into a more meaningful peace agreement. As soon as it became clear that the impact of the tsunami had been even more severe along the island's east coast, where local communities are predominantly Tamil, compared to the southern coast, where Sinhalese predominate, calls went out for a permanent end to the conflict so that the island could unite in response to the disaster. The media in Colombo was full of commentary to the effect that the disaster presented an opportunity for a permanent settlement of the conflict. Yet within weeks the government led by President Chandrika Kumaratunga and the leadership of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were sniping at each other over the distribution of aid and government policies regarding reconstruction. Despite the big effort to get emergency supplies to the country's east, it soon became apparent that the lion's share of the aid was going to the Sinhalese south. The war of words escalated into repeated violations of the "ceasefire" and after the LTTE called for a boycott of the presidential elections in November 2005, the newly elected President Mahinda Rajapakse called for changes to a ceasefire agreement that he believed was too generous to the LTTE. By the middle of 2006, the ceasefire agreement was in tatters and although it was not formally abandoned, it failed to prevent a worsening of the conflict into 2007.

While proposals for ending the conflict have centered on the introduction of a federal system of government that would give a degree of

[4] As expressed in the interview with Martin Mulligan, see above.

autonomy to four provinces – that would include a Tamil-dominated province in the north-east – many writers (e.g., Wickramasinghe 2006; Ismail 2005; Kiribamune 2004) have argued that there has been a growing promotion of mythological accounts of both Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism that have little foundation in real history. These conflicting nationalisms make the construction of a multicultural society very difficult. Furthermore, it is not only the Tamil communities of the north and east that suffer from this promotion of divisive claims of identity and nationhood. There are signs of growing ethnic tensions within the communities of the south and west where Tamil and Muslim minorities continue to live in Sinhalese-dominated communities, and the escalation of armed conflict has once again drained the country's economy and undermined its tourism industry. Civilians living in the north and east face the constant risk of raids by the Sri Lankan army and airforce while those living far away in Colombo and the southwest once again learn to live with frequent roadblocks and the constant presence of heavily armed soldiers.

The 2004 tsunami resulted in the most wide-ranging natural disaster the world has seen, severely affecting four different countries, and it is imperative that we learn as much as we can from this experience about how to effectively respond to natural disasters. At the same time, it has become difficult to separate the tsunami disaster from the human disaster of the prolonged and escalating civil conflict in Sri Lanka. The expatriate Sri Lankan writer Qadri Ismail called his recent book *Abiding by Sri Lanka* because he feels the country will not benefit from external critics – even Sri Lankans living abroad – who want to simplify the difficulties that the country is facing (Ismail 2005). The people of Sri Lanka, he suggests, need good friends who have a deep understanding of the country's complex history at the intersection of trade routes and many "external" influences. A deep-seated sense of being vulnerable to "outside influences" (see Wickramasinghe 2006) has probably been exacerbated by the shock of the tsunami and the country's heavy reliance on international aid. Those who choose to "abide by Sri Lanka" will want to ensure that the international goodwill that followed the disaster will not fade to white and that the friendship can extend to efforts to bring about a deep reconciliation of the entrenched conflict. At the risk of sounding like unhelpful external critics, we offer the following review of the response to the tsunami disaster in Sri Lanka in order to better understand the achievements and weaknesses in that response. We hope that a frank and independent assessment can help to strengthen Sri Lanka's capacity to deal with future disasters as much as it can inform the policies of those who administer international aid in

countries such as Australia. The review of the response was conducted in September 2006.

THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

The tsunami affected 1,000 km stretch of land from Jaffna in the north to Colombo in the southwest. Although the tsunami waves impacted nearly 65% of Sri Lanka's coastline, the local impacts varied considerably depending on landforms and the presence or otherwise of natural features – such as mangrove clusters – that could mitigate the impacts. The worst destruction occurred in the northern and eastern provinces, which accounted for two-thirds of deaths and 60% of those displaced. One-third of the total deaths occurred in the eastern district of Ampara, where a large strip of flat land meets the sea. Damage in the south and southwest was generally more moderate, with some protection provided by headlands, dunes and steep coastal gradients. While there were pockets of acute damage in the southern districts of Galle and Hambantota, it is estimated that only 20% of the southern coastal population was affected, by comparison with up to 80% in the eastern districts of Ampara and Mullaitivu.

Initial predictions that the tsunami would shave more than a percentage point from Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth proved excessively pessimistic, and in fact GDP growth increased from 5.4% in 2004 to 6% in 2005 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2006). The relatively limited economic impact is due to the fact that the sectors which experienced the most extensive damage – fisheries and tourism – are relatively minor contributors to the national economy and losses in these sectors were offset by a post-tsunami construction boom and strong growth in the manufacturing and inland plantation agriculture sectors, which were unaffected by the tsunami.

While the macroeconomic impact of the tsunami is limited, the localized effects are severe. Catastrophic human and asset losses and disruption to markets and social networks have sharply reduced employment and output. Human suffering has been exacerbated by delays, inequities and inefficiencies in housing and livelihood rehabilitation processes which have increased poverty and threatened social stability. As is usually the case with disasters in developing countries, impacts fell disproportionately among the poorest and most vulnerable population groups – fishing communities, shanty dwellers and those living in the northern and eastern provinces which prior to the tsunami had been ravaged by two decades of civil war.

Table 1
Estimated economic losses from the tsunami ($ million)

Sector	Asset losses	Output losses	
Housing	340	–	65,275 houses destroyed, 38,261 houses damaged
Transport infrastructure	75	–	415 km of roads damaged, southern railway line damaged
Water and sanitation	42	–	Damage to pipelines, wells and coastal irrigation facilities
Education and health	86	–	100 hospital and clinics, and 182 schools damaged or destroyed
Fisheries	97	200	20,000 fishing vessels damaged or destroyed
Tourism	250	130	58 of the country's 242 registered hotels damaged or destroyed
Others	110	–	
Total	**1000**	**330**	

Sources: Asian Development Bank (2005), Central Bank of Sri Lanka (2006)

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

The most obvious environmental impacts came from the massive intrusion of saltwater into estuaries and freshwater systems adjacent to the coast and problems caused by new deposits of sand. Some coastal vegetation, that helped reduce the impacts of the waves of houses and other infrastructure was damaged, although the trees generally withstood the impacts better than buildings and anecdotal evidence suggests that most animals got themselves out of harm's way (seemingly sensing the approaching waves). Sri Lankan government figures suggest that 23,449 acres of cultivated land was badly affected by the waves and saltwater intrusions, including 9,000 acres of rice paddy, while some 60,000 wells were also contaminated with saltwater.[5] No figures are available on the saltwater contamination of coastal lagoons and wetlands but there can be no doubt that such contamination has had a bad impact on the coastal freshwater ecology. New sandbars cut some estuaries off from the sea and dredging to create new connecting channels was a fairly low priority for local government. Less obvious environmental impacts include the sucking back into the sea of considerable debris –

[5] Figures on environmental impacts are from official Sri Lankan government statistics made available through the UN Office of the Special Envoy for Tsunami Recover, www.tsunamispecialenvoy.org/.

including some hazardous and toxic materials; the spread of weeds (notably prickly pear) in areas that were impacted by the waves; and damage to coral reefs from the coast of Sri Lanka out into the Indian Ocean and the Andaman Sea. The US-based Nature Conservancy sent a team of experts to Sri Lanka within weeks of the disaster and they highlighted the likely impact on ecosystems of debris. However, they reported that damage to coral reefs had been less than many feared. The picture is complicated by the fact that inappropriate human developments were having negative impacts on coastal and marine environments long before the tsunami arrived. This included the clearing of coastal vegetation and the removal of sand-dunes; a lack of meaningful control over the impact of fishing and harvesting on the stock of fish and other marine animals; and the mining of coral reefs – especially near Hikkaduwa – for lime. The problem in knowing the real extent of environmental damage is the lack of baseline data about what existed before the tsunami and a lack of capacity for monitoring any recovery. Environmental monitoring has never been a high priority in Sri Lanka and the picture regarding the environmental impacts of the tsunami remained murky until the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) sent in a team of 30 international experts in May 2005 to assess the situation. However, they also struggled with the lack of adequate baseline data to make any significant comparisons (UNEP 2005).

SOCIAL IMPACTS

Sri Lanka had no inkling that it was vulnerable to such a disaster coming from the sea – although there are references to an earlier tsunami in mythology dating back about 2000 years. The coastal communities could not have been less prepared for such a disaster; indeed a joke that quickly did the rounds suggested that when a minor official in the prime minister's department got a phone call warning that tsunami was on its way from Indonesia he sent a welcoming party to the airport to visit the Indonesian guest (whoever he might be). There were no local or regional disaster plans in place and, indeed, when the approaching tsunami waves sucked back the seawater by more than one kilometer, many people ran to the beaches to see what was happening! The only thing that prevented a far greater death toll was the fact that the tsunami struck on a Sunday, which also happened to be a public holiday and a Buddhist religious day. Many schools, within meters of the sea, were empty and significant numbers of people were visiting temples away from the coast.

The most obvious social impacts came from the loss of lives and the permanent injuries suffered by many survivors. Government figures suggest that the disaster left some 40,000 people needing long-term financial assistance.[6] This included women who lost their husbands, children who lost their parents, elderly who lost younger family members, people who suffered severe injuries, and disabled people who lost their family support. The grief of the survivors was compounded by the fact that it sometimes took days or weeks for parents to relocate missing children and thousands of people were simply declared "missing" for up to a year after the disaster. The government followed a policy of trying to place the new orphans with members of their extended families but in many cases there were very few family members left alive.

According to an Oxfam report, four times as many women as men died in the tsunami (MacDonald 2005). Along the east coast the killer waves hit at a time when many women were taking their daily sea bath and in many areas, men and boys had much more experience than women and girls in climbing trees. Sri Lankan men and boys are much more likely to be able to swim than women and girls. Of course, this meant that many surviving children lost their mothers and this compounds the fact that for many Sri Lankan households it is the women more than the men who leave to take up work in the Middle East and some western countries. A growing number of Sri Lankan children are growing up without meaningful contact with their mothers.

Once the survivors got into temporary shelter, reports began to circulate of sexual violence committed against women and girls in the chaos that immediately followed the disaster (Fisher 2005). Sexual abuse and harassment of women appears to have continued in the emergency shelter camps – especially with many more male survivors than female – and conditions in the camps were very difficult for pregnant women and nursing mothers (ibid.). The surviving women were left with even greater responsibility to care for their own children or the children of missing relatives. While the men went out of the temporary camps to find what work they could do, the women had to make their shelters into some kind of home and make sure that their children were safe in an unknown environment. Furthermore, many of the surviving children had been traumatized by their experiences during the tsunami and its aftermath and the responsibility for looking after their emotional needs fell mainly on the women.

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[6] According to Sri Lankan government figures reported by the UN Office of the Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery, www.tsunamispecialenvoy.org/country/srilanka.asap/.

There have also been some division across Sri Lanka about how to best remember the dead. In the wake of the tsunami, much attention focused on the fact that around 1,000 people died in a train that was hit by the waves at a place called Peraliya, near Hikkaduwa, north of Galle and four of the battered carriages of that "ghost train" were left in place for a year as a kind of memorial. Of course, most of those who died in the train were not local to the area and locals began to resent the constant stream of visitors to the wrecked carriages. On the eve of the first anniversary of the disaster, the carriages were removed and President Rajapakse, who attended a ceremony at the site, announced that a more suitable permanent memorial would be built nearby. But of course the disaster was so widespread that a single national memorial seems quite inappropriate and as the first anniversary approached, many of the people in the south who had lost relatives told one of the authors that they were hoping for a modest local, religious ceremony to honour the dead in a dignified way. The anniversary led to repeat television showings of footage from the disaster and this only reminded the victims of the horrors they had experienced. Local ceremonies were, on the whole, subdued and low-key, as the survivors wished. However, the problem of how to best remember the victims of the disaster – dead and living – will not subside with the passing of the years.

GOVERNANCE ISSUES IN THE RECONSTRUCTION PROCESS

The reconstruction process has been impeded by deficiencies in governance at all levels. There have been criticisms of policy design and implementation processes, with a lack of clarity in objectives, and costly policy shifts and reversals. The subjugation of the national interest to the personal interests of those in power is an entrenched feature of Sri Lankan politics. The pervasive politicization of the bureaucracy has hampered the ability of government agencies to manage programs in a consistent and transparent manner, and corruption and political interference have influenced the distribution of aid resources. Within the bureaucracy deficiencies in technical and management capacity are exacerbated by poorly defined organizational structures – with a multiplicity of government agencies having overlapping functions – and poor coordination between levels of government and with the non-government sector. Political uncertainty, exacerbated by the civil conflict and the tendency of incoming governments to overturn the arrangements of their predecessors, has contributed to a poor investment climate which has further slowed the reconstruction process. In view of the longstanding tensions between the

Tamil north-east and the Sinhalese southwest, observers emphasised the importance of conflict sensitive recovery strategies which should be manifestly fair and equitable, decentralized (to strengthen local insititutions), pro-poor and consciously designed to enhance the peace process (Uyangoda 2005). However, a combination of political opportunism and bad policy resulted in the blocking of reconstruction aid to the worst-affected northern and eastern provinces, contributing to the resumption of the decades-old civil conflict between the government and the LTTE.

Reconstruction is hampered by poor inter-agency coordination and a heavily centralized power structure. The propensity of incoming governments to establish new ministries on top of existing structures has led to a proliferation of government agencies with overlapping policy responsibilities.[7] In the absence of effective policy coordination mechanisms agencies tend to act in isolation, creating confusion and inhibiting the development of unified frameworks (Wanasinghe 2004). In the wake of the tsunami, several ministries established relief and reconstruction schemes with little or no consultation or coordination with other agencies (Institute of Policy Studies 2005). In the past, decentralization initiatives have met with limited success due to partisan rivalries and a lack of bureaucratic and political will. As a result, responsibilities are poorly demarcated between central and local levels of government, policy making remains driven from the center with little regional input, and local agencies charged with the delivery of public goods and services are underfunded and poorly equipped to perform their tasks (Porter 2004). The exclusion of local authorities from reconstruction planning has deprived policy makers of essential local knowledge and contributed to unsuitable or impractical policies (Uyangoda 2005; Centre for Policy Alternatives 2006).

THE CIVIL CONFLICT: A FAILURE OF LEADERSHIP

In the days following the tsunami, there were encouraging signs of a rapprochement between the major Sinhalese political parties, and between the government and LTTE, in their response to a disaster which had devastated Sinhalese and Tamil communities alike. As mentioned in the

[7] In 2004, Sri Lanka had 35 ministries headed by a cabinet minister, with an additional 21 headed by ministers of non-cabinet rank. Policy responsibilities in key sectors such as agriculture, industry and education are divided between several ministries (Porter 2004: 4).

introduction to this paper, an initial groundswell of sentiment across Sri Lanka for finding a permanent solution to long-standing civil conflict over demands for independence for the Tamil-dominated north-east province was reflected in television debates and opinion pieces in the newspapers. Not long afterwards, Rajasingham-Senanayake (2005: 18) wrote:

> The post-tsunami response of individuals and groups to the suffering of 'other' communities of diverse linguisitic and religious persuasion demonstrated beyond doubt that the so-called ethnic conflict … was largely a product and sustained by power struggles among politicians, presidents and armed actors.

In the early stages of tsunami recovery the government led by President Chandrika Kumaratunga and the LTTE managed to negotiate an agreement on the relief effort that was called the Post-Tsunami Operation Mechanism Structures (P-TOMS). Yet on both sides the political leaders continued with divisive rhetoric and no new proposals were put on the table to strengthen the peace talks. Allegations quickly emerged that the government had favoured the Sinhalese south-western regions over the Tamil north-east in the distribution of aid resources and these put considerable strain on the peace process (Shanmugaratnam 2005; Sirisena 2005).

President Kumaratunga reached the end of her maximum term in 2005 and the governing party – Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) – nominated the man who had been her prime minister, Mahinda Rajapakse, as its presidential candidate. The LTTE was suspicious of Rajapakse's attitude towards the nationalistic Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) whose stronghold was in the same southern region in which Rajapakse's electorate was located. The JVP had opposed the 2002 ceasefire agreement and continued to oppose the involvement of Norway in brokering peace talks. They had also taken action to block the implementation of P-TOMS by taking action in the Supreme Court and they held a balance of power in the national parliament (Silva 2005). The LTTE called for a boycott of the presidential poll. Ironically, this favored Rajapakse over the more politically pragmatic leader of the United National Party, Ranil Wickremasinghe. The JVP welcomed the election of Rajapakse and demanded a much harder line against the LTTE in any future peace negotiations. Rajapakse rejected JVP calls to sack Norway as the mediator of peace talks but he ratcheted up the nationalistic rhetoric and the LTTE leaders responded with their own sharpened rhetoric.

Soon after Rajapakse was elected, LTTE militants began a series of small scale violations of the ceasefire agreement, which they said were in response to ongoing harassment by the Sri Lankan Army based in the north.[8] The LTTE also accused the Sri Lankan government of being behind the 2005 defection of former LTTE Colonel Karuna and 5,000 militants who remained loyal to him in the Batticaloa district. As the violence began to escalate, both sides threatened to withdraw from formal ceasefire talks and when delayed talks were held in Geneva in late February, they made little progress. A further round of peace talks had been scheduled for April 2006 but the LTTE withdrew as violence escalated in the north. The biggest battle in the renewed conflict took place in July 2006 over a dispute about the provision of drinking water to a housing estate near Trincomalee. Soon after that 17 Tamil aid workers employed by the French agency Action Against Hunger were murdered in the town of Muttur and both sides in the conflict accused each other of being responsible. On August 10, the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies told the government that renewed fighting was preventing them from reaching people in need. Yet the situation got even worse when an attack by the Sri Lankan Airforce killed 19 Tamil schoolgirls in what the military had claimed was an attack on a guerrilla training center.

At the end of September 2006, the UN's Deputy Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery, Eric Schwartz, visited the conflict zone and announced that "In parts of the north and east the tsunami recovery process has ground to a halt and significant investments in reconstruction, so generously supported by donors around the world, are now imperilled." Two days later a report in the *Gulf Times* estimated that as many as 200,000 people had been displaced by the renewed fighting and less than a week later the Sri Lankan government announced an increase of 32% in the projected military budget for 2006/2007. This announcement of an increase in military spending came just after a Sri Lankan government audit had found that only 13% of the promised foreign aid for tsunami recovery had actually been used. While much of the promised aid had simply not arrived, this disappointing performance was also due to the renewed conflict in the north and east and a slow pace of reconstruction in the south. The slow pace of rebuilding was, in turn, partly due to shortages of skilled labor and to delays in getting access to suitable land for permanent new settlements (Steele 2005).

[8] The following account of renewed conflict in Sri Lanka is taken from a range of online newspaper and magazine reports, cross-referenced to ensure accuracy.

Poor economic performances may have been largely responsible for a significant political shift that took place in Sri Lanka in October 2006. The SLFP announced that it was ending its agreement with the JVP and would cooperate with the opposition UNP to get ceasefire talks back on track (Francis 2006). Government representatives attended mediated talks with LTTE leaders in Geneva in late October and surprisingly put a new proposal for a federal structure – giving a degree of autonomy to the North-East province – on the table. Prior to this Rajapakse had rejected UNP calls for federalism, insisting that the unitary state was the only thing preventing the break-up of the nation. Unfortunately, the lead-up to the talks at the end of October was marred by a Tamil Tiger attack on a bus carrying Sri Lankan soldiers in the town of Habarana. The Tigers also launched a daring raid intended to sink a Sri Lankan navy boat in Galle Harbour. The raid was foiled when the three fishing vessels carrying the Tiger militants were destroyed before reaching their target and Sinhalese residents of Galle vented their anger by attacking businesses owned by local Tamils. The provocative action by the Tigers did not bode well for the latest attempt to revive the fragile peace negotiations and, predictably, the talks in Geneva made no progress at all.

HOUSING: THE POLICY RESPONSE

The human costs of the tsunami had been tragically exacerbated by extensive unregulated coastal development and within days of the disaster, the national government announced that it would impose a buffer zone to prevent residential rebuilding within 100 m of the sea in the south-western districts and 200 m in the eastern districts. To planners in Colombo, the tragedy of the tsunami had one positive consequence in that it created the opportunity to address the chronic problem of unplanned and inappropriate coastal development. Unfortunately, this came as a second blow to families that had lost their homes and possessions in what had now become the buffer zone. The legislation was widely criticized nationally and internationally, the Asian Development Bank noting that "While there is wide consensus that a buffer zone may be necessary to reduce potential coastal risks, there is no scientific and consultative basis for the proposed zones" (Asian Development Bank 2005: 16). The absence of a convincing rationale for the buffer zone policy and lack of serious attempt to rally public and donor support behind it was a significant failure given its potentially enormous social and economic impacts, and the clumsy handling of policy in the immediate aftermath of the disaster seriously damaged the

prospects for more meaningful controls over inappropriate coastal development – a lost opportunity. The exemption of undamaged houses led to charges of inconsistency, with critics pointing out that whether public safety or environmental rehabilitation is the rationale for the buffer zone, it should be uniformly applied (Institute of Policy Studies 2005). A lack of consultation with local government and planning authorities was apparent in the creation of arbitrary setback limits without reference to local topography. The exemption of hotels from the ban on building in the buffer zone led to charges that policy making had been captured by vested interests and that the true purpose of the buffer zone was the relocation of poor fishing families and squatter communities to the invisible hinterland to serve an elite vision of coastal beautification and to make way for tourism development (Uyangoda 2005; Bastian 2005).

Domestic and international criticism of the buffer zone, together with mounting evidence of its impracticality, led to its effective repeal at the end of 2005. The mandatory 100 and 200 m setbacks were abandoned in favor of a reversion to the provisions of the national Coastal Zone Management Plan (CZMP), proclaimed in 1997 but never enforced. The CZMP specifies area-specific setback zones ranging from 35 to 125 m depending on local physical conditions, and allows for exemptions to be decided by local government authorities in consultation with the Coastal Conservation Department. The new regulations are generally agreed to be an improvement, providing the flexibility to accommodate planning requirements to local conditions (Centre for Policy Alternatives 2006).

The creation of the controversial buffer zone resulted in the creation of two separate policy frameworks governing housing assistance – one for families outside the setback limit, who were allowed to rebuild *in situ;* and one for those inside it who, under the terms of the legislation, would need to be relocated. The former were provided with government grants to rebuild their houses, with some additional assistance from aid agencies, while the latter were to be resettled in new housing projects (NHPs) funded and constructed by donors, primarily international NGOs, with a smaller number of local institutions, individuals and commercial contractors. Donors were also responsible for provision of water, power and sewerage services. The government retained nominal responsibility for identification and acquisition of land, development of design regulations and approval of building plans, and authentication of beneficiary eligibility. A lack of communication and overlapping of responsibilities led to complex approval and management processes for NHPs, involving several separate government agencies (TAFREN 2005).

With the concentration of human settlement within 50 m off the coast in most tsunami-affected areas, the creation of the buffer zone generated massive displacement. Around 51,000 families were relocated to inland transitional shelters to wait for permanent houses to be built for them within the NHPs. More than a year after the tsunami, many thousands were still there (Centre for Policy Alternatives 2005: 17). Hazardous conditions in these transitional camps were reported, with problems of overcrowding, poor sanitation and lack of drinking water and high levels of alcoholism, domestic violence and sexual abuse (Weinstein 2005). Camp residents in the conflict-affected north-east faced additional hazards of harassment from both government security forces and the LTTE, and reports of the use of tsunami IDP camps as bases for LTTE military operations (Amnesty International 2007).

Land scarcity has proved a significant obstacle, particularly in the densely populated coastal regions of the southern and western provinces. The government's preference has been to site NHPs on public land. Although the government owns more than 80% of Sri Lanka's land, most of it is unavailable for resettlement, being occupied by national parks and water catchment areas or given over to long-term agricultural leases (Centre for Policy Alternatives 2005). The scarcity of public land has led to the siting of some NHPs in hazard-prone or remote areas up to 5 km from the coast. Private acquisitions, the only option in areas where public land is very limited, are associated with delays and price inflation. In some regions, land prices outside the buffer zone escalated five – or tenfold (Institute of Policy Studies 2005). Long delays in the acquisition process led many NGOs to engage privately in negotiations with landholders.

The government contracted with various donors for the construction of 34,000 housing units on more than 300 sites; however, actual construction lagged. By April 2006 only 6,000 houses had been completed and 10,000 were under construction. Delays in construction were particularly marked in the eastern and northern regions, where more than one year after the tsunami, the building of transitional shelters and rehabilitation of some schools and hospitals had not been completed. With the shifting of the buffer zone boundaries, an estimated 11,000 of the 51,000 households in the original buffer zone are now outside it. These households have been given the option of resettling in the NHPs or returning to their land to rebuild *in situ.* Due to long delays in NHP construction which have forced many households into protracted stays in transitional shelters and misgivings regarding the location of their proposed new homes, most are opting to rebuild. While the reversion to the CZMP setbacks reduces the

NHP housing requirement, the majority will still be relocated so the fundamental policy remains unchanged.

LIVELIHOOD REBUILDING: THE POLICY RESPONSE

After housing, livelihoods restoration was the second major focus of post-tsunami aid, attracting $126 million in donor funds in 2005. At least eight ministries and over 100 national and international agencies were involved in livelihoods-related projects in 2005 (Kapadia 2005). With the massive destruction of assets and infrastructure, loss of human capital and collapse of markets, and without ready access to alternative occupations, coastal households faced severe economic stress in the months after the tsunami. During the first six months, a combination of government relief payments, aid and temporary cash for work programs operated by aid agencies was generally effective in addressing immediate welfare needs, although the implementation of government relief measures was partial and uneven. Welfare transfers to families who had lost their houses were paid for two months, but were then delayed for more than four months while eligibility criteria were changed to exclude those who maintained independent income sources after the tsunami. The four-month delay caused considerable hardship, particularly among families who had lost breadwinners and were unable to participate in work programs, and led to demonstrations in several districts. Payments to 234,000 families recommenced in June 2005.

In tsunami-affected areas, an estimated three quarters of families depended on the informal sector for their livelihoods, which typically include a mix of fishing, tourism, roadside trading, cottage industry and wage labor. An estimated one-third of affected households earned their primary incomes from fishing or fisheries-related activities such as net-making. Livelihood interventions have focused heavily on asset replacement in the fisheries sector while other occupations, particularly those in which women predominate, have received substantially less attention (ibid.). In these sectors, which are under intense pressure in the post-tsunami environment, well-intentioned donor interventions have in some cases exacerbated their problems. Post-tsunami activity in the construction sector has done little to support a hope for recovery in construction-related occupations, as the aid agencies responsible for new housing programs tend to employ contractors from Colombo rather than local brick-makers and carpenters. The female-dominated food production and garment sectors have had to contend with competition from a well-intentioned influx of local

and international aid goods. Low barriers to entry into women's occupations have attracted new entrants seeking to offset the loss of other income sources. Problems of market saturation have been compounded by poorly-planned asset replacement initiatives which have little regard for market conditions or the capacity and experience of recipients. At a time when depopulation and a precipitous decline in household incomes was exerting severe downward pressure on demand, more households than ever were in possession of sewing machines, coir-making machines and fish boxes for mobile trade, including many who had never previously engaged in these occupations (ibid.; Haug & Weerackody 2005).

Given the difficulties of promoting alternative occupations to traumatized and asset-depleted populations, it is not surprising that many development agencies have focused on restoring traditional and well understood occupations. A narrow focus on restoring fisheries entails longer-term risks, however, with growing awareness that the sector in its pre-tsunami form is economically and environmentally unsustainable and associated with high poverty incidence. Fisheries modernization and the development of downstream and ancillary value-adding activities such as food processing and packaging and the servicing of boats and equipment, together with the promotion of growth sectors such as local manufacturing, tourism and services are important considerations in longer-term livelihood planning. Although observers have for several years been keenly aware of the declining ability of traditional livelihood activities to provide sustainable rural employment, there have been few coordinated attempts to address the problem, due to a combination of policy inertia and lack of economic and technical resources. The post-tsunami environment provides a rare conjunction of incentive and resources for the promotion of more sustainable, higher-income livelihood options, an opportunity which is in danger of being wasted by the focus on restoring the pre-tsunami status quo.

THE ROLE OF DONORS AND NON-GOVERNMENT ACTORS

Since the tsunami the number of international NGOs working in Sri Lanka has increased from 50 prior to the tsunami to more than 150 (Centre for Policy Alternatives 2006), and government agencies have been faced with the challenge of managing an enormous influx of resources and NGOs with varying degrees of experience and resources. Due to pressures on local public sector capacity, governments in the affected countries have contracted the construction of NHPs to multilateral and bilateral donors and NGOs, retaining a coordination and regulatory role. Implementation is

complicated by limited state capacity to manage politically and technically complex problems of land availability, valuation, boundary establishment and attribution of title. There are concerns regarding the experience and competence of some NGOs, with claims of competition for "clients", duplication of activities and poorly-designed interventions. Aid agencies and governments are under pressure to show immediate results, overriding consultative processes and contributing to hasty policy decisions. Questions have been raised about the motivations and activities of non-state agencies, with allegations that some are pursuing business interests or religious proselytization agendas, or acting as fronts for political parties (Wicramasinghe 2005). Government officials have found it difficult to distinguish between established professional NGOs and a plethora of newly constituted agencies, some of which are likely to have been formed opportunistically in response to the presence of aid funds (Weinstein 2005). The efficiency and quality of NGO programs has been compromised by lack of experience and pressure for quick results (Haug & Weerackody 2005: 28). Some international NGOs simply arrived in local communities and started handing out cash, boats, bicycles and sewing machines on demand. Projects which enable the fast disbursement of large volumes of funds and can be attractively presented to constituencies in donor countries, such as the establishment of orphanages and replacement of fishing boats which could be publicly handed over to grateful recipients, were sought after by international NGOs at the expense of less photogenic interventions (Korf 2006). The apparent simplicity and media-attractiveness of such programs attracted several agencies and individuals with little or no experience in fisheries (Creech 2005).

Deficiencies have been reported in procurement and targeting practices, duplication of efforts, and competition between agencies for "clients" (Haug & Weerackody 2005). A year after the tsunami, Sri Lanka's Task Force for the Rebuilding the Nation (TAFREN) estimated that the influx of international aid meant that there were now more fishing boats in the south than there had been before the tsunami and that the danger of overfishing had increased.[9] There have been complaints regarding the "crowding out" of local aid agencies by large international NGOs, and the propensity of foreign agencies to employ highly paid foreign consultants with limited local knowledge rather than making use of local expertise (Uyangoda 2005; Institute of Policy Studies 2005). The poaching of local NGO staff by INGOs offering vastly higher salaries has also been a matter

[9] According to the Galle District Livelihood Co-ordinator for TAFREN, Dr. A. D. Nanayakarra, who was interviewed by Martin Mulligan in December 2005.

of concern, while for their part Sri Lankan NGOs have been criticized for poor project management and politicization (Haug & Weerackody 2005: 28).

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION AND PARTICIPATION

The absence of formal communication and consultation mechanisms and a lack of strong civil society institutions to exercise countervailing pressures have contributed to a lack of transparency and participation, and affected communities have had limited input in reconstruction planning and implementation (Uyangoda 2005; Weinstein 2005; Weligamage et al. 2005). The importance of broad consultative processes is an idea that has made little headway in Sri Lanka's bureaucratic culture, with a commonly-held view among government officials that public participation in policy making is more an inconvenience than a useful input, causing distractions and delays and that the opinions of "beneficiaries" are of little value as they lack technical expertise. An official "top-down" approach is reported in some cases to extend to a failure to keep survivors informed of progress with resettlement plans.[10] At the same time, there is widespread disquiet among the prospective occupants of the NHPs regarding the quality and location of their new homes, with many voicing concerns regarding access to their livelihoods and the loss of links with their traditional neighborhoods, and the failure to allow affected communities a say in the reconstruction process has led to public expressions of frustration through demonstrations. Failures to take specific measures to inform all members of communities about their programs led to the exclusion of poorer, more socially isolated families from aid beneficiary lists, while extended families with social and political resources were able to use multiple strategies for accessing aid (Haug & Weerackody 2005: 23).

A lack of consultation with affected communities has been apparent in planning and design rules which were drawn up in Colombo with little regard for local family arrangements and housing practices. Concerns have been voiced regarding the layout and design of the new projects, which vary significantly in terms of attractiveness, building quality and sensitivity to community practices. The design specifications drawn up by TAFREN

[10] In 2004, Sri Lanka had 35 ministries headed by a cabinet minister, with an additional 21 headed by ministers of non-cabinet rank. Policy responsibilities in key sectors such as agriculture, industry and education are divided between several ministries (Porter 2004: 4).

include a minimum floor area of 500 square feet – a size which is arguably suitable for very small families, but represents a substantial reduction for many relocated households. Some contractors have interpreted the specified minimum floor area as a standard, making no allowance for variations in household size. With customs of extended family cohabitation in coastal regions, it is common for a single household to include 7–10 members, a pattern which is likely to have intensified with the post-tsunami integration of extended families. Moreover, fishing villages have traditionally consisted of groups of discrete hamlets or family compounds of up to ten houses each. Rather than incorporating a variety of dwellings suitable for various household sizes and configurations, some newly built NHPs consist of barracks-like rows of identical small buildings. The adoption of inappropriate layout plans is a concern, with approvals having been given for multi-storey high-density developments in coastal towns, a design form hitherto confined to major urban centers. There are concerns regarding design quality of some NHPs, with warnings that they may become a euphemism for sub-standard, low-cost housing (Philips 2005).

A lack of local expertise among international aid agency staff coupled with a failure to consult with local experts has been noted (Uyangoda 2005). The use of Colombo-based architects to prepare site plans, with little or no local knowledge and limited consultation with end-users has raised concerns regarding inappropriate design features – for example, the design of inadequate ventilation systems based on an erroneous assumption that gas fuel will be used for cooking, despite estimates that around 75% of households in affected districts use cheaper biomass fuels such as wood and paddy husks (Institute of Policy Studies 2005). Other design problems are raised by lack of space and include insufficient separation between wells and septic tanks. Quality concerns have been raised by the high cost of construction materials, due in part to Sri Lanka's congested and dilapidated regional road network, coupled with an acute labor and skills shortage, with reports that untrained contractors are using inappropriate materials and methods (ibid.).

POLITICIZATION AND CORRUPTION

The reconstruction process operates in a highly politicized context. Successive governments have allowed partisan political considerations to distort policy and administrative processes, a process which has been accelerated by the progressive erosion of public service neutrality since the 1970s, when a series of constitutional amendments strengthened political

control of the bureaucracy by transferring control of public service appointments to politicians. Appointments based on patronage rather than merit have reduced the quality of public servants and enabled political interference in the allocation of public resources (Porter 2004). Hand-in-hand with the problem of political interference is the problem of petty corruption, which is embedded in a wide range of official transactions including the delivery of welfare goods and services.

There is abundant evidence that political considerations have affected the allocation of post-tsunami aid resources at all levels of government. At the central level, political factors are evident in significant regional disparities in resource allocation and the failure to implement the P-TOMS agreement. Almost all of the construction commenced by mid-2005 was in the southern districts, which account for less than a quarter of total housing losses, while in the severely affected eastern districts of Ampara, Batticaloa and Trincomalee, there has been little or no progress with reconstruction. Hambantota district, the constituency of former prime minister and now President Mahinda Rajapakse, appears to have been singled out for favourable attention, with the establishment of a special "Helping Hambantota" office by the prime minister in addition to the standard district-level organizational structures set up to manage recovery (Weligamage et al. 2005). In Hambantota, the number of new houses under construction exceeds the estimated requirement by nearly 2,000 (Centre for Policy Alternatives 2006).

At the local level, the use of state resources to reward political support has long been a feature of Sri Lankan politics, and there is widespread evidence of political interference in beneficiary selection and the distribution of aid resources. Considerable discretionary power is exercized by the village chief (Grama Nilidari), who is appointed by the local member of parliament. The Grama Nilidari is a key gatekeeper of access to government resources, as his approval is required for welfare payments, asset replacements, housing and a variety of other government benefits. In addition, the Grama Nilidari indirectly control access to non-government benefits as most NGOs rely on beneficiary lists provided by government sources. There is widespread evidence of the misallocation of benefits by local officials, including the taking of bribes and political partisanship in the compilation of beneficiary lists. As well, politicians have directly engaged in the misallocation of aid resources to their own supporters or electorates, in some cases to non-affected inland communities. During the 2005 presidential election campaign, it is alleged that one local politician handed out some 30 fishing boats to win support for his party. Corruption is not restricted to the state sector, with evidence of diversion of

aid funds by NGO officials and by community-based organizations, with allegations that valuable goods such as boats are distributed to relatives and friends of committee members (Haug & Weerackody 2005).

Failures of coordination and mistargeting have created serious inequities and inefficiencies in asset replacement in the fisheries sector. In one example, in a southern village in which only 23 boats had been damaged, seven or eight agencies were operating boat replacement programs, and in many districts the number of fishing craft replaced exceeds the estimated number destroyed by wide margins (ibid.). Stories proliferated of households that managed to obtain multiple boats and other equipment while others missed out completely. Some men who had never been to sea were given brand new fishing boats and some of these were then sold at profit to those who could use them, while others who had lost their boats did not receive replacements (Creech 2005). The use of fishermen's cooperatives, traditionally an avenue for the dispensation of political patronage, as conduits for aid distribution has been criticized, with reports of mis-targeting and the denial of assistance to non-members (ibid.).

ADMINISTRATIVE INEFFICIENCIES

Duplication and lack of coordination between government agencies created considerable confusion, with as many as four ministries issuing various buffer zone regulations during 2005. Confusion regarding the demarcation of responsibilities has contributed to delays. In Thiraimadu in the Batticaloa district, for example, an area of public land designated as an NHP site was found to be flood-prone and required dredging and filling prior to construction. Disagreement between the Ministry for Urban Development and the Tsunami Housing Reconstruction Unit ensued, with each claiming that the other was responsible for making the land suitable for building. The government pledged in August 2005 to contribute half of the dredging costs, but by March 2006 the treasury had still not released the funds and no works had commenced (Centre for Policy Alternatives 2006). As a result of poor communication between the center and provinces, local officials are often unaware of policy developments, leading to the inconsistent application of regulations. In some areas, the buffer zone legislation was strictly enforced, with reports of residents being forcibly removed by police when they attempted to rebuild their homes and that NGOs were being instructed to remove emergency tents in which people were staying, while in other areas, local authorities were allowing rebuilding within the buffer zone (Weinstein 2005). Directives regarding the revision of buffer zone setbacks took several

months to be issued to local authorities in Hambantota and Batticaloa districts, who in March 2006 were continuing to apply the original legislation, a factor which has contributed to the excess of NHP construction in Hambantota (Centre for Policy Alternatives 2006).

Obstructive administrative practices have created obstacles in service delivery, exacerbating a sense of helplessness and anger among survivors. Many of the tsunami survivors lost all their possessions, including any documents that could establish their identities. Many could not access existing bank accounts or prove that they had indeed owned houses that were destroyed or damaged. A year after, the tsunami volunteer lawyers were still helping people to recreate necessary documentation. In some areas local officials insisted that only those whose names were on the electoral roll prior to the tsunami were eligible for assistance. There have been reports of survivors being turned away from banks distributing relief funds where they have lost their identification documents or where there are minor mistakes in the replacement documents provided by local government officials (Weinstein 2005).

The eligibility criteria for government relief schemes were often very broad and provided substantial discretion to local government officials, leading to inconsistencies in interpretation, delays and appeals. Mistargeting created inefficiencies in the allocation of food rations, with evidence that around 10% of ration cards were issued to non-affected individuals (Institute of Policy Studies 2005). Poor targeting has contributed to social tensions. Perceptions that some have unduly benefited from tsunami aid while the genuinely affected have not received their fair share have fuelled resentment (Haug & Weerackody 2005; Weligamage et al. 2005). The fisheries sector has been relatively well-served by livelihood programs while other livelihood activities have received less attention, leading to tensions between fishing families and others who feel that their needs have been neglected. Tensions also exist between the new "tsunami poor" and long-term poor families who were not affected by the tsunami, as many of the latter are excluded by post-tsunami aid programs. Families displaced by the civil conflict, many of whom have been living in camps for many years, remain ineligible for the housing and welfare benefits directed to tsunami survivors. The earmarking of donor funds for tsunami relief led NGOs to focus on tsunami work to the neglect of other equally disadvantaged groups, notably households displaced by the civil conflict, exacerbating intra-communal tensions. Although NGOs acknowledge this problem, most claim to be limited by funding arrangements which restrict their activities to tsunami rehabilitation (Kapadia 2005).

A grant of Rs.250,000 was made available for houses outside the buffer zone deemed to be "fully damaged", with damage amounting for more than 40% of total value, and Rs.100,000 for houses deemed to be partly damaged. The fixing of payments at arbitrary levels without reference to actual reconstruction costs created inequities and inefficiencies. Households which successfully utilized their grants were eligible for further low-interest loans of up to Rs.500,000, administered by the state banks, if they can demonstrate repayment capacity and provide collateral, thereby discriminating against low-income households. Women in some districts experienced difficulties in accessing the housing grant, which are issued in the name of the male household head, with reports that the banks which administered the payments were insisting that female property owners sign their land over to their husbands in order to qualify for the payment (ActionAid International 2006).

The high-profile state-led *Susahana* credit program which was set up to assist microentrepreneurs to rebuild their assets and expand their businesses after the tsunami has had little impact in practice and by mid-2005 fewer than 10,000 applicants had taken loans under the scheme. The limited outreach is due to highly restrictive loan conditions which impact disproportionately on poorer borrowers. In a departure from standard microfinance practice, loan applicants under the *Susahana* scheme are required to provide both collateral and guarantors above a certain income level, conditions which many tsunami survivors are unable to meet. In addition, loans are only given for businesses registered before the tsunami – thereby excluding the vast majority of microenterprises which operate in the informal sector and are unregistered, as well as those seeking to take up new livelihoods in response to changed post-tsunami circumstances such as the loss of an income earner.

CONCLUSION

While the tsunami crisis created an opportunity for Sri Lanka to rethink important aspects of its physical and social development – such as the prior lack of strategic planning in regard to coastal development and an overreliance on industries that fail to provide sustainable livelihoods for the poor – inherent weaknesses in regard to governance and the development and implementation of public policy have meant that this opportunity has largely been lost. Even worse, the opportunity to deepen the dialogue for peace that grew in the aftermath of the tsunami was also frittered away by politicians, on both sides of the civil divide, who quickly returned to their

divisive rhetoric. The results of the 2005 presidential elections deepened the political crisis and the Sri Lankan government was very slow in putting a proposal for federalism on the negotiating table. The virtual collapse of the fragile ceasefire that existed at the time the tsunami arrived has ensured that the impact of the natural disaster has been compounded by the worsening human disaster (i.e., the conflict), especially in the areas worst affected by the tsunami.

What should never be forgotten, however, is that Sri Lankans responded generously to each other in the face of such a crisis and that the world community tried to respond quickly, effectively, and generously as well. This was the first natural disaster to affect so many countries at the same time and, in the context of global climate change, it may not be the last. There are still many lessons to be learnt about the successes as well as the failings and it is never too late for Sri Lanka itself to address the ongoing weaknesses that have seriously undermined the recovery effort to date.

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