
TSUNAMI REHABILITATION – REFLECTIONS

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It is one year since the tsunami struck the shores of this island. There will be many debates and discussions on how our society and all those who came to help us have responded to this catastrophe. These debates will take place both here and abroad since the response to the tsunami took a globalized form. The purpose of this contribution is to add a few thoughts to this debate.

The starting point of this contribution is to question traditional responses to natural disasters which treat disasters as isolated ‘events’ rather than a process characterized by the interrelationship between a natural phenomenon and society. When a disaster is treated as an event, the focus is on restoring what was destroyed (infrastructure, livelihoods, etc.) and to do it as soon as possible. What dominates is a discourse of emergency and restoration of the conditions that existed before the event. Of course, to do this not only are funds necessary, but they also have to be spent as soon as possible. A cursory glance at the current reconstruction process in Sri Lanka shows that it is dominated by this discourse. Hence the debate is on how much we have achieved while criticism focuses on delays.

In contrast to this, the approach that focuses on the relationship between the natural phenomenon and society is much more interested in the links between conditions that existed in society prior to the natural event and disaster. It argues that the impact of the disaster is mediated through the structures of society that existed prior to disaster, and therefore there is a need to understand these conditions first if we are to embark on a successful disaster management programme.

In the literature that emphasizes the need to focus on the links between natural phenomena and society there is a differentiation between ‘hazards’ and ‘disasters.’ The term hazard is used to identify the natural phenomenon. When hazards mediate through society, we have disasters. Therefore the term disaster is reserved for the analysis of the interaction between natural phenomena and society.

In responding to disasters, the focus of the latter approach is both emergency restoration and long-term mitigation and

limitations of social costs. Even in the emergency phase these issues are taken into account. The fundamental objective is to improve the capacity of the society to take care of disasters on a long term basis. This will involve many things other than construction.

Land Use Pattern

If we apply a society-centred approach to disaster management, we will see that quite a few of disasters in Sri Lanka are linked to land-use and land-ownership patterns. Most of the disasters in Sri Lanka are floods, droughts and associated phenomena like landslides. Many people who live and survive in locations such as low-lying areas, non-irrigated land and steep hilly areas suffer due to disasters. Many of these areas are unsuitable for human habitation. But some people are found in these locations due to the land ownership patterns of our society. For many poor people these areas unsuitable for living are the only option they have. In fact, in urban areas one can see how market forces have literally pushed poor people closer to water. The greater demand for land by capital, the more likely it is that those who do not have capital will be pushed towards water. The plight of these people is well-known and has been highlighted through dramas such as ‘Kelani Palama.’ Hence the land use and land ownership patterns have a bearing on how a natural disaster mediates through social structures.

This analysis is relevant for understanding the social impact of the tsunami as well, although the scale of the phenomenon was such that it had an impact on the better-off sections of society as well. Quite a lot of people who were forced to live near the coastline were affected by the tsunami. But the impact as well as the capacity to recover depends on the class positions of the people. For example, in the case of the fishing community, it is the poorer sections of the community who lived close to the vulnerable locations. Those who benefit from the surplus in fishing such as fish *mudalalis* might not live right close to the sea, and even if they did they would have had much more permanent structures, which would have helped to minimize the effect at least to some extent. Poorer urban dwellers who crowd into our densely populated coastline in some parts of the country were also affected by the tsunami.

Land use and land ownership is only one, but a very key aspect for understanding disasters in Sri Lanka. This analysis can be expanded, bringing in many other dimensions of the society that existed prior to the moment when the natural phenomenon struck the society.

If we look at disasters in this manner, focusing on linkages with conditions of society, disaster management gets closely linked with normal development issues. If we take its link to land use and land ownership, disaster management steps can range from resettlement, improvements and introducing preventive measures for those who are forced to live in difficult areas, various forms of support to improve the coping mechanisms of the people, etc. In addition, since anything to do with alienation of land and land settlement in Sri Lanka has direct links with the conflict issues, the disaster management strategies have to take into account the link between land and conflict as well.

Tsunami Reconstruction

My impression is that what has been going on in Sri Lanka in the name of 'Tsunami Reconstruction' is dominated by the more traditional 'event focused' and 'emergency mode' responses. Unfortunately this is also backed by an unprecedented amount of funds, charity mentality and dominance of a large number of international agencies who might only be here for a short period, and will not be here to face some of the problems that this approach might create.

A combination of emergency mode and the large amount of funds is creating pressures to spend money as soon as possible. This is a formula for corruption, ill-gotten gains, destruction of carefully nurtured practices, organizations and values, and for even violence. Many development professionals have argued for years that spending money is not the most important thing in successful development interventions.

While the charity mentality has to be admired for the enormous amount of funds it has generated, one has to be aware of the more pernicious side of charity. For many years development professionals have argued against the dependency and the power relations that a charity mentality creates and recreates. The tsunami has brought out a new dimension of the charity mentality that can be called the 'blame game.' The essence of this is to blame the recipient society when those who have come to help us on the basis of charity face difficulties. Many who have come to help have

come from very different societies, different levels of development and ethos. Hence they are bound to see very different conditions in Sri Lanka. In development studies these are seen as challenges, and overcoming these difficulties is an essential part of development. In the case of those who come with a charity focus, the instinct is to blame the victims who are ungrateful and have not created the proper conditions so that the funds that are so generously given can be utilised. Therefore now one hears so many complains about the difficulties that these organisations who are engaged in tsunami reconstruction are facing.

My fear is the dominance of this 'event focused' and 'emergency mode' to tsunami reconstruction could easily leave Sri Lankan society much weaker than when these interventions began. This is not to argue that nothing positive will come of it. Some things will be constructed, livelihoods restored, and a certain degree of rehabilitation done. But unless we change the approach, new problems will be created, and most probably quite a few problems related to disaster management that we faced before the tsunami struck will remain.

Therefore the current situation poses many challenges to the agencies that have come to help Sri Lanka. The international NGOs who have been preaching values like accountability, local ownership and sustainability, all over the world, have a special responsibility to face these issues. They have to devise novel methods of impact assessment of their interventions. It is best this is done not as a ritual in the project implementation process, but after a lapse of at least one year after they have finished their work. This is the practice of some of the donor agencies and it gives a better opportunity to understand what Sri Lanka has received from these interventions in the long term. To end this note I shall enumerate some of the issues that have to be considered. This is done in the spirit of at least beginning a public discussion of the impact of these interventions.

Flow of funds and accountability

Going by all accounts, the global response to tsunami has generated an unprecedented amount of funds. Hence transparency and accountability of the use of funds is essential. This has already become a topic of discussion in the country.

There can be a number of aspects when it comes to the use of funds. Since tsunami reconstruction has also brought in a large number of international organizations and expatriate

personnel, the obvious question is how much is really used in Sri Lanka and how much is taken straight back out of the country. Secondly, the 'emergency mode' usually forces the participation of many actors and intermediaries in addition to the beneficiary. For example, when housing programmes were implemented on a self-help, one of the key objectives was to ensure the fund goes directly to the beneficiary and the beneficiary has the autonomy to decide on the construction process. The objective was to ensure that the funds benefited the beneficiary as much as possible. But the 'emergency mode' makes it difficult to implement such an approach. It is interesting to find out, how are such issues tackled in the tsunami reconstruction? Are there many intermediaries absorbing funds on the way so that a very small proportion ends up with the beneficiary? What is the scale of outflow? Finally there is the issue of cost effectiveness. The issue is, what are the unit costs of the rehabilitation process? If this is high it will not be a proper use of funds. It is quite possible that there are enough funds to tackle disaster management in Sri Lanka on a long term basis, but due to the approach adopted we will end up carrying out costly interventions.

Impact on markets

One of amusing stories I read in the newspapers was how an international NGO, who wanted to buy land for the purpose of constructing houses, was complaining about the increase in land prices due their intervention. Their argument was that they did not come to Sri Lanka to enrich landowners but to help poor people who have been affected by the tsunami. Obviously this organization has not heard of market forces. Development interventions, especially large scale construction, have an impact on various types of markets which in turn has an influence on many other aspects of social existence. These are the linkages with society one has to explore when planning construction activities. Proper development planning will take these factors into account so as to carry out the task as well as to minimize negative impacts.

Impact on local institutions

The entry of a large number of international organizations endowed with a significant amount of funds has an impact on the labour market. There are already complaints from local NGOs how this is creating an outflow from their organizations. Most probably this will happen to government institutions as well. One of the alarming stories that I have heard is how a principal of a rural school was

neglecting the school because he is spending so much of his time with an NGO involved in tsunami reconstruction. Hence the negative impact of local institutions and weakening of their capacity might be much wider than we think.

If the organizations involved in tsunami reconstruction include the concept of local ownership, strengthening and ensuring the sustainability, of local institutions right from the start, one can minimize such effects. There are many development projects that have left very little behind because they did not focus on this aspect right from the beginning. I hope tsunami reconstruction will not go one step further and leave local institutions weaker.

Choice of beneficiaries and power structures

Anybody who has been involved in development projects will tell you that choosing beneficiaries is one of the most important but difficult tasks. The issue is that existing power relations of society intervene to channel benefits to the influential and relatively powerful, while ignoring others. Development projects spend lot of time carrying out studies and developing methodologies to get this right. Even after all this, your objectives can get scuttled through structures of power. The choice of beneficiaries is a critical question that organizations involved in reconstruction have to consider carefully and be transparent about it. If not, they are sure to leave many problems behind which Sri Lanka will have to tackle later.

Impact on the conflict

The discussion on the methods of choosing beneficiaries takes an added importance because it has to take place in a country that has gone through a long drawn-out conflict and is tackling a very difficult peace process. The process of choosing beneficiaries, if not properly handled, can exacerbate existing conflicts and generate new ones. We already have a history of donor funding contributing to the conflict. We really do not need a repetition.

When we survey these questions, tsunami reconstruction does not look like a simple task. These complexities are nothing new to skilled development professionals. That is why they spend years studying a subject called development studies and take time to understand societies that they go into in all their complexity. Unfortunately those who work within the 'emergency mode' tend not to have the time or patience to do this. The end result of such an approach could be that you leave the society you came to help, much weaker than before.