
AFTER THE TSUNAMI: A PLEA FOR RESPONSIBLE RECONSTRUCTION

Rajan Philips

Civil society groups and engineering and environmental professionals are raising concerns about the government's national task force on redevelopment that includes only representatives from the finance, tourism and other business sectors but no one from the affected areas or from among the public sector professionals, technical professions, or the scientists. Their fear is that Sri Lanka's reconstruction effort may be driven more by national economic and elitist considerations than by local community and environmental priorities.

A particular issue is the future of the fishing communities whose homes and livelihood have been uprooted by the tsunami. The Coast Conservation Department already has guidelines and standards for coastal conservation and regulating coastal construction. These requirements were often ignored in the past by the tourism industry and its political supporters, and even now only the fishing communities may have to conform to its new enforcement. It would appear that the tourist hotels that were damaged by the tsunami will be allowed redevelopment at their old locations, while the fishers' dwellings that were destroyed will be relocated interior. This will also clear the coast for beautifying the rural beaches and gentrifying the urban edges in the affected areas, which appears to be the elitist 'visioning' among the advocates of a top-down Master Plan approach to reconstruction. Jayadeva Uyangoda, the political scientist, has criticised this approach as "anti-poor" and "un-humanitarian". According to him, government officials have already warned some fisher communities that they should not return to their coastal habitat and this has sent "shock waves among the poor, displaced communities".

It is important to bear in mind the human, social and the environmental costs of the tsunami disaster. Generations of families, long established but uninsured ways of life, whole communities and ecological systems have been either obliterated or seriously damaged in Aceh, in Sri Lanka, in Thailand, in parts of India's Tamil Nadu and the islands of Andaman and Nicobar - the two isolated island groups that have long preserved some of the pristine forms of human culture studied by anthropologists. The relief and reconstruction efforts should be humbled by the losses that are irrecoverable, and should be sensitive to the trauma of the survivors and the need for ecological rehabilitation. The tsunami victims should be rehabilitated through their own empowerment. It would be a double tragedy for them to be victims, yet again, of top-down Master Plans.

This is not to deny or minimize the role of the government in relief and reconstruction efforts or the usefulness of Master Plans, especially in the rebuilding of the hard infrastructure. However, it is necessary to emphasize that the government and political leaders should give up their traditional patron-client attitude towards their own citizens, and that planning and implementation should involve grass root consultation and empowerment. At a seminar, held at the Peradeniya Faculty of Engineering soon after the tsunami disaster, one of the participants proposed that while the government should spearhead the task of rebuilding infrastructure, the affected communities should be empowered to re-establish their habitats and livelihood with help from professionals and civil society organizations. Such an approach will enable local design solutions being found to local problems, including that of providing safe shoreline setbacks and stronger structures to accommodate the fishing communities, without arbitrarily severing them from their, sea-based livelihood. This is also the approach preferred by Cameron Sinclair's Architecture for Humanity, a New York based group that provides design services to communities affected by natural disasters.

The government would be well advised to exercise more caution and less haste in undertaking long term reconstruction. In many areas, the impacts of the waves are reported to have been so severe that their effects need to be properly assessed and mitigated. The reconstruction program should also be used to integrate the traditional coastal communities with their modern intruders, namely, large scale commercial fishing and the tourism industry. What the tsunamis did comprehensively to all three parties in a matter of minutes, commercial fishing and tourism have been doing incrementally to the traditional communities for over three decades. Their small boats were squeezed in the ocean by commercial trawlers sailing out of fishery harbours, and they were squeezed on the land by the string of tourist hotels that were often developed without assessment or mitigation of their community and environmental impacts. In most cases, there is very little by way of infrastructure integration between individual hotels and the adjacent community in a given area. In Sri Lanka, the garbage generated by tourist hotels became a serious problem with no one taking responsibility for managing it. The government has a role in ensuring that infrastructure integration and environmental management are properly addressed in the reconstruction of the tourist areas.

It is no secret that the government is a short term financial beneficiary of the tsunami disaster. With relatively smaller debt

load (\$9.6bn at \$500 per capita, compared to Indonesia's \$132bn at \$5,500 per capita), Sri Lanka need not have accepted the freeze offer. But the government may not have had a choice given the state of its finances due to political instability and the moratorium on the peace process. No doubt, the government leaders will take undue credit as the economic indicators start showing an upward trend as aid moneys flow in and economic activities burst out after the tsunami disaster. But the real story will not be in the economic indicators from the Central Bank, but on the ground in the affected areas, and how the victims of the disaster are pulling their lives together.

It is a moot point whether, in the long run, the Sri Lankan government will be able to effectively absorb and utilise the tsunami aid considering the low aid utilization rate (14%, lower than the international average of 20%) that Sri Lanka has traditionally been able to achieve. It is also no secret that low aid utilization in the past has been accompanied by a high corruption rate. What guarantees are there that these trends will not persist but be reversed as the country begins to absorb and use the tsunami aid money? The World Bank President, James Wolfensohn, is said to have

suggested the creation of a web site to record the ins and outs of the tsunami cash. A necessary insult, but not a sufficient safeguard. Transparency and efficiency can only be achieved in any significant measure by empowering local communities and transferring decision making powers to provincial and other local bodies.

The survivors of the tsunami disaster deserve better than patronage handouts and top-down master plans from their government. The people of the world responded with extraordinary generosity to help the victims of the Asian tragedy. In every country, the citizens were a million bucks ahead of their governments in their generosity. The people forced governments to out-pledge each other to the global relief effort. Questions have been raised as to how much of the monies pledged will actually be delivered. In the BBC's 'Hard Talk' program, Barbara Stocking of Oxfam, London, assured that civil society organizations will keep the people power in flow to force donor governments to honour their commitments. What is equally important is to use the same power to make sure that the recipient governments and political groups do not betray the victims of the tsunami waves and that they are given the power and the resources to re-establish their own lives. ■

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LETTER FROM AMPARA

“A midst the outpouring of human emotions and sympathies for the affected people all over the country, a heartening phenomenon seen throughout these last seven days has been the immense mobilization at the people's level - those who have come forward in their voluntary capacities to help in this humanitarian endeavour with relief and other forms of assistance such as clearing concrete/debris and recovering dead bodies. The people (irrespective of ethnic differences) acted fast, stepped in before the government, which has been very slow to act in this moment of national emergency. Government presence in the form of immediate assistance was practically non-existent in these areas. And when the government did put its act together – the devastation in the South caught the attention of the Sinhala politicians fast. For days on end the state media relayed the destruction in the southern part of Sri Lanka. The Sinhala south has remained the vote bank and a scrambling space for the major parties including the JVP. The tsunami disaster was then another grim reminder that the Sinhala constituency had to be immediately taken on board. The devastation of the south was like a blade struck deep into the sensibilities of these politicians and party leaders who went on lamenting for days on end of the calamity, using the state media to the maximum. The devastation in the already war ravaged North – East was not a top priority until civil society groups and individuals who had visited these areas highlighted the bias in the media reports. Some politicians even made statements to the effect that a tragedy has struck the south – almost erasing from their historical memory that the people in the North-East had coped with tragedy after tragedy for the last 20 years!”

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