
SRI LANKAN CIVIL SOCIETY MESSAGE TO THE G 8

This is the text of the statement issued by a group of Civil Society organisations in Sri Lanka during the G.8 meeting in London.

One month after the earthquake and tsunami of 26 December 2004, the people of Sri Lanka and the global community are searching for strategies to recover from the damage caused to the lives and livelihoods of communities in the coastal areas of the South and South-East Asian regions.

As the true picture of the loss of life, the devastation of homes, the destruction of community assets and economic infrastructure emerges, it is time to take stock and to agree on the principles that should underpin the collective effort to support communities as they rebuild their shattered lives.

The response to the tsunami disaster, both in Sri Lanka and across the globe has been characterized by a spontaneous display of human solidarity. Governments and civil society, both within the region and in other parts of the world, have been challenged by force of public opinion to explore new approaches to disaster management, vulnerability reduction and sustainable development.

Civil society, the private sector, governments and the international donor community joined together in the provision of immediate relief. Their initial efforts will need to be sustained over the coming months until households and communities are able once more to provide for themselves.

The unprecedented display of Sri Lankan and international solidarity, both official and unofficial, offers great opportunities for recovery and reconstruction for the affected communities and countries. At the same time, contending approaches to recovery and rebuilding have emerged that may increase the risk of new tensions both within societies and between countries and their international partners.

Maximizing the opportunities and minimizing the risks will require concerted efforts on the part of all concerned. Such efforts should be based on agreement on the principles that should guide the actions of all those involved in the rebuilding process.

As civil society organizations, we have elaborated the principles that will inspire our own initiatives. We have formulated recommendations to the political leaders and administrators entrusted with the management of the governmental and official international response to the disaster and with the coordination of the efforts of different actors.

We have committed ourselves to working in partnership with both Government and the donor community in the design and implementation of rehabilitation programmes on the understanding

that these will be based on the needs and aspirations of affected communities. We welcome the invitation from both to participate in the collective effort.

Having joined in the development of a common platform of principles and programmes, we wish to bring the following considerations to the attention of decision-makers in the international donor community:

1. the ongoing search for peace through negotiation

- a. the tsunami disaster took place against the backdrop of an ethnic conflict that has undermined social harmony, economic performance and democratic governance in Sri Lanka for the past twenty years;
- b. the disaster devastated coastal communities in all parts of the island, especially along the densely populated eastern, northern and southern coast-lines; the worst affected are the poor people whose livelihoods were linked to fisheries, tourism and the informal sector;
- c. the tsunami disaster affected areas under government control and under de facto LTTE control alike, devastating Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim households without discrimination;
- d. sustaining the fragile peace established under the Cease-Fire Agreement signed between the Government and the leadership of the LTTE in February 2002 is key to the well-being of all communities in Sri Lanka, including those directly affected by the tsunami;
- e. the outpouring of international generosity in response to the disaster offers new opportunities to advance the search for peace and development;
- f. the government, the LTTE and leaders of the muslim community have acknowledged that coping with the humanitarian emergency and meeting the challenge of longer-term reconstruction and resettlement calls for new forms of collaboration;
- g. flexibility and creativity on the part of all will be required to resolve contentious issues in the interests of the affected communities;
- h. collaboration in addressing the immediate humanitarian needs and designing programmes for rehabilitation and reconstruction could open up new spaces for interaction that contribute to better understanding and mutual trust;

i. imaginative new joint mechanisms will facilitate the provision of relief and support to community rehabilitation;

j. such mechanisms would be strengthened if Government, the LTTE, the muslim community and other stakeholders, including the Opposition, could agree on basic principles of human security that will be operative throughout the period of post-tsunami reconstruction.

2. Rehabilitation of communities affected by the tsunami disaster

a. the response to the tsunami disaster should reflect the right of all citizens to receive humanitarian assistance and the obligation to allow equal access to all disaster victims;

b. the entire process of relief and rehabilitation must be organized in a manner that empowers affected communities, strengthens their capacity to recover fully from the disaster and provides them with opportunities to achieve sustainable development;

c. throughout, all stakeholders should respect the basic rights of affected communities, including their right to meaningful participation in a democratic and pluralistic society;

d. programmes and resource allocations must be implemented in a fair and equitable manner, reflecting an objective assessment of the extent of damage and participatory identification of needs;

e. special attention should be given to the roles, rights and aspirations of women and children in the affected households and communities;

f. all forms of discrimination, particularly based on ethnic, religious or political affiliation, must be avoided;

g. the attainment of these goals can best be achieved through community participation at all stages of the rehabilitation effort;

h. local partnerships should be encouraged to ensure community ownership of the rehabilitation effort and to offset systemic pressures for further centralization of resources and programmes;

i. local community and civil society initiatives should be organized within a broader framework established by government on the basis of extensive local consultations;

j. recognizing that the institutions of local governance have limited capacity to undertake the complex challenges ahead, building and strengthening their capacities should be given priority by the government and the donor community;

k. the consultations should allow for full participation of the affected communities and all other stake-holders, including political parties, civil society, the private sector, and partners from the international community;

l. all stakeholders should commit themselves to the highest standards and to the provision of full information on the resources and programmes both to the affected communities and to the general public, in Sri Lanka and in the international community, in the spirit of transparency and accountability;

m. special opportunities are offered by the arrival of many new actors, from international, governmental. and non-governmental agencies ; we welcome them and invite them to work in partnership with local communities and organizations, respecting our cultures and customs, in conformity with the ICRC/NGO Code of Conduct for Disaster Response Programmes, and providing full information on their resources and their programmes to the communities in whose name their actions have been launched.

3. Longer-term perspectives

a. the urgency of relief and rehabilitation should not divert the attention of stakeholders from our collective responsibility to address longer term challenges of development with equity, democratic governance and human security;

b. the debate on the broader implications of the tsunami disaster that is now taking place provides an opportunity for all to explore new approaches to development that allow for:

- i. the reduction of poverty through more rapid and more equitable growth,
- ii. environmental sustainability, and
- iii. more inclusive governance;

c. new trends and challenges will need to be monitored, analyzed and addressed by all stakeholders so that we may together take full advantage of the new opportunities for peace and development.

As we embark together in the design of our support for the rebuilding of lives and livelihoods, we commit ourselves anew to assuming our responsibilities and extend our hand of support to our partners in Government and in the international community. We do so above all in support of affected communities and in a spirit of constructive engagement based on the core values and principles that we share. ■