
THE ROLE OF LOCAL SOLIDARITY IN SRI LANKA'S TSUNAMI DISASTER RESPONSE

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When disaster strikes people often want to help out in any way that they can. In those countries not directly affected the most common and practical form of individual assistance is through donations in cash or kind to aid organisations or national emergency appeal funds. However, for those people actually living in the affected countries, contributing financially often is not enough. They want to be physically and directly involved. This article examines the motivation and impact of local solidarity in Sri Lanka's disaster response and assesses its possible implications for official relief and reconstruction efforts.

Faced with a humanitarian disaster of unprecedented suddenness and scale the Sri Lankan government struggled to respond to the emergency needs of the affected areas during the immediate aftermath of the tsunami. However, almost before the state services had time to recover many of these needs were already being addressed through the massive mobilisation of ordinary citizens on an individual or collective basis across the country.

Thousands of people on their own initiatives, in small groups or through informal networks of family, friends or work colleagues, took it upon themselves to travel to the affected areas to offer direct assistance in searching for survivors, transporting them to hospitals, retrieving the dead and delivering medical supplies, food, shelter and clothing. Many more supported this effort in the capital and other cities, towns and villages throughout Sri Lanka by collecting donations in cash or kind, purchasing and organising the delivery of relief goods. Beyond the initial emergency phase of the response many of the more affluent individuals and groups have subsequently become directly involved in establishing their own reconstruction efforts by renovating schools and sponsoring the construction of new homes for those whose houses were damaged or destroyed by the tsunami.

Individual Assistance

Why did so many Sri Lankans choose to engage in direct individual humanitarian assistance rather than supporting existing appeals such as President's Fund for Disaster Relief, the work of respected local NGO's like Sarvodaya or through international organisations with an established presence in the country such as Oxfam or Save the Children? Informal discussions with a number of individuals involved in personal relief efforts during the first few weeks of the disaster response revealed four basic rationales: compassionate solidarity, cathartic healing, a sense of spectacle and a distrust of official avenues for aid and assistance¹.

Firstly, compassionate solidarity. Everybody seemed to know someone who had been affected by the disaster and everyone was familiar with the areas concerned. Connections with affected regions through ancestral villages, as previous holiday destinations, through work colleagues, old school friends, employees or faith based affiliations, personalised the linkages between the victims of disaster and those who were not directly involved. Connections on these levels seemed to further demand a personalised approach to humanitarian assistance.

This primary rationale was closely linked with the psychological impact of disaster on the unaffected 'survivor'. Many of those who were fortunate enough not to have been on the coast at the time found difficulty coming to terms with comprehending the enormity of the disaster and experienced unease over the fact that it had passed them by whilst so many others had died, been injured or displaced. Others, who had experienced lucky escapes wanted to return to the disaster site to help in the relief effort. For both, there was a sense that direct involvement in humanitarian assistance would provide some form of cathartic emotional healing, almost through a sort of atonement for having survived.

A third motivating factor was the sense of spectacle that had been created by the devastation. Many people felt that they just needed to see for themselves what had happened. This was not generally in the context of disaster tourism, although such voyeurism did exist on a small scale, but was more closely aligned with the psychological needs of the unaffected survivor described above. Whilst the direct delivery of aid on an individual basis enabled many Sri Lankans to both exercise their compassionate solidarity with those affected and start to expunge some of the personal psychological traumas associated with the experience of a national disaster, there was also a widely expressed fourth rationale which highlighted popular perceptions concerning the governance of official national and international humanitarian aid efforts.

There was a widespread belief that monies channelled through national relief funds or local organisations would somehow be abused and may not reach the intended beneficiaries. Common criticisms of the official humanitarian efforts included the influence of corruption, political self-interests and the lack of transparency or accountability. International organisations were also criticised for their high operational overheads which were seen to reduce the amount of funding available for those in need. Direct individual assistance was viewed as a guaranteed strategy to ensure that personal relief contributions reached the hands of the intended

beneficiaries without incurring any institutional operational costs. What then was the impact of such personal humanitarian assistance? During the first few days following the tsunami individual aid efforts undoubtedly helped back-stop delays in the government and international community's response for affected communities in many areas. It was however a hugely ad hoc affair. Many areas, particularly the more remote welfare camps and villages, received little or no independent support and the content, quality and utility of personal aid efforts varied enormously. Informal assistance seemed to play a valuable role when it was provided on the basis of a personal contact within a specific affected area and where the beneficiaries were consulted in advance regarding their specific needs and requirements. Where it worked less well was when well-meaning individuals attempted to deliver relief items to an affected area with no local contacts or appreciation of the needs. In such circumstances inappropriate aid was often dumped at the first available welfare camp irrespective of whether it was wanted or not.

In the longer term, as the relief phase of the emergency response turns to recovery and reconstruction, villages are already being adopted by concerned individuals and small groups who believe that they can rebuild properties quicker, more cost effectively and with greater sensitivity to beneficiary needs than the efforts of the state and international agencies. With Sri Lanka's track record of aid absorption standing at only 14% they may be right. Perhaps, as the Sri Lankan Government's Task Force For Rebuilding the Nation and the World Bank considers the modalities of constructing 80,000 new homes, they should reflect on the possibilities of engagement with private individual assistance in getting the job done.

Notes

¹ Informal discussions with about 30 individuals and direct involvement in two small scale informal relief missions. ■

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