

LIMITS OF AID

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When the tsunami hit Sri Lanka I was in the UK. On Boxing Day I woke up to the news of the death toll. When I realised that it had hit the southern and eastern parts of the country I knew that the death toll would rise rapidly. It was not easy for me to deal with the disaster from this distance. There were of course frantic calls to find out about relatives and friends. The news that my immediate family was safe calmed me down. But some of my friends were affected and I am still in the process of finding out their fate. My frustration about the situation that I was caught in was mostly because I could not be a part of the relief efforts in Sri Lanka. I knew that my friends in civil society would be working day and night. I tried to calm down by doing my bit from the UK.

What happened afterwards showed that this was truly a globalised disaster. The disaster hit a number of countries. The numbers affected were significant. People in the countries affected had friends and relatives settled down and working in many other parts of the world, especially in the developed countries and in the Middle East. Phone lines to Sri Lanka from UK were jammed by relatives and friends trying to find out what had happened to their loved ones. I am sure the same situation would have prevailed in the Middle Eastern countries where many Sri Lankans work. The tsunami also caught many tourists from Europe and elsewhere who were on holiday. As the numbers are totted up, it looks as if for many European countries this has been the worst disaster since the Second World War, in terms of number of people killed or missing. The human linkages that cut across the globe due to the movement of people for work, to settle or for leisure has made this disaster truly a global one. Finally there was the fantastic coverage by the media, which brought the impact of the disaster to the homes of the people in the UK.

Globalised Response

The globalised disaster has brought a globalised response in mobilising aid. What was heartening to note was the response from the population. In the UK contributions by the people actually pushed the government to be more generous. Fortunately, for Sri Lanka natural disasters do not create political issues like the war in Iraq. Hence the response to tsunami was very different from the insensitivity to the equally significant human costs of the conflict in Iraq. The collections from the population and pledges from the governments have surpassed all expectations. For once we saw the positive side of globalisation on a mass scale.

Whatever might be the future complications associated with these aid flows, Sri Lanka has to be grateful for this assistance. There is no way that Sri Lanka could rebuild the affected areas and

rehabilitate the population without this support. This is especially true for immediate relief and large scale infrastructure development. In these aspects of relief and rehabilitation foreign assistance not only brings in much needed resources, but also knowledge and expertise.

While acknowledging the importance of aid at this moment for the affected countries, it is also necessary to clearly identify the limits of what development aid can do in the long term rehabilitation process. There is a need to focus on this aspect not only because of the impressions often created by the media in developed countries which affect public perceptions in donor countries, but also because of some of the ideas that currently dominate aid agencies. For example, in the TV news coverage of the tsunami, one of things that I sorely missed was, the spontaneous response from the population which I could not be a part of. Compared to the coverage given to the organised aid flow, there were snippets of the popular response from the Sri Lankan people, such as some people bringing food parcels to distribute at the height of the disaster or a group of people getting together to repair a school. But this was depicted as being insignificant compared to what needs to be done. In fact one TV news item from Galle depicted a food distribution effort by a small group of people as ad hoc and disorganised. The search was for large scale organised efforts supported by aid and probably directed by aid agencies. These perceptions are bound to continue in the debate about whether aid is getting to the right place. Many would look towards the management structures of aid agencies in order to ensure that the aid achieves what it is meant to do, and that it makes a difference.

Local Response

These ideas ignore two fundamental principles that aid efforts have to keep in mind if they are to make any difference to the lives of the population affected, especially in the long term. First, that there is a huge response from the Sri Lanka population to disasters like this, and in order to achieve positive outcomes that benefit Sri Lankans, it is necessary to base outside efforts on such local initiatives. Second, ignoring the primacy of the internal processes to bring about change has extremely dangerous political implications which have brought disasters to many parts of the world.

In order to understand the local responses it is necessary to look at different levels of society ranging from the individual, family, kinship group, workplaces and hundreds of civil society organisations scattered around the villages and towns of Sri Lanka. By civil society organisations I do not mean only the donor

supported NGOs, but numerous other organisations formed through voluntary initiatives.

A few days after the event there were already reports of individuals leaving welfare centres. This meant individuals were beginning to take care of themselves by making use of whatever resources they had. These resources are not only material, but social as well. Support from family and kinship groups has always been a safety net for many people in times of need and disasters. These networks are bound to play a role in this instance. I have heard of many efforts by civic organisations at various levels in society. Offices and factories started initiatives to look for workers and their families in order to help them. Similar efforts are being reported from schools. Professionals have been volunteering. There are other initiatives started for totally other reasons. For example, some friends of mine who have been regularly visiting game parks for holidays, have organised themselves to go into that area and help families of workers in these parks. If we can sum up all that has been going on in Sri Lankan society it will amount to a tremendous effort. In the long run it is these efforts that will help Sri Lanka. Aid agencies need to make use of these efforts if their work is to have a positive outcome.

Aid Agencies

It is necessary to remind the aid agencies of this simple message because the dominant ideas and practices that prevail in these agencies are based on something completely different. Although aid agencies always employ a rhetoric of ownership and participation, in order to emphasise the key role that aid receiving countries should play in implementing donor supported projects, a closer look shows that the fundamental ideas behind many projects come from the discourses of the aid agencies themselves.

Foreign aid began with the objective of assisting developing countries in the area of economic development. From this it has expanded now to include a whole host of other areas. These include reforming the entire structure of the state, establishing democracy, protecting human rights, ensuring gender equality, protecting the environment and, in countries like Sri Lanka affected by conflicts, resolving conflicts and changing age-old attitudes. It has become an agenda that encompasses almost every aspect of the life of the recipient countries. It amounts to a total transformation of aid receiving countries including individual attitudes. Looked at this way it has many similarities with the civilising agenda of the colonial project. In many instances there are no troops occupying these countries. But there are resources and ideas that flow into the recipient countries in order to achieve these objectives.

In order to fulfil this agenda, aid agencies usually make huge generalisations. Due to the very nature of their business these agencies have to make policies globally. In order to make their task easier, they rely on broad generalisations which group very

different societies under a single category. For a long time we had the fantasy of the 'Third World'. If this was a category that dominated the field of development, a similar construction is the notion of 'failed states' which is now doing the rounds to characterise societies torn apart by conflicts. These are huge generalisations that hinder rather than clarify our understanding of these societies. They are unable to capture the specificities of these societies. It is also a denial of the histories of these countries and often demonstrates intellectual laziness. Sometimes agencies working with these categories do not even utilise the knowledge already available about these societies in order to unravel their specificity.

Secondly, the subtext that underlies much of these transformations of recipient societies believes that western capitalist democracies have found answers to all problems faced by humanity, and what we need to do is to implement these in post-colonial societies. Therefore to promote economic growth, we just have to liberalise markets. Democracy means liberal democracy and one needs to establish elements of liberal democracy like free and fair elections, political parties, parliaments and strengthen civil society. This 'end of history' thesis means that the answers to all problems faced by post-colonial societies are already there, no new answers can come from them and all that we need to do is to implement them.

Donor Rhetoric

The final assumption is that donor supported projects are the key factor that brings about this transformation. Poverty is to be alleviated, not through the day to day struggle of the poor in the context of the destructive effects of the market forces or through their political mobilisation—but through donor supported projects. In achieving democracy the focus is once again on projects and not on social forces that can hinder or promote democratisation. As mentioned, there is always rhetoric about the importance of ownership on the part of the recipient countries for aid projects to succeed. However this ownership and participation is on the basis of fundamental ideas and decisions brought from outside. The countries themselves have very little chance of generating their own ideas about economic and political development. The sum total of these ideas can amount to another western civilising agenda as occurred during colonialism. From this to the next step of promoting democracy with troops, occupation and bombs, as is happening in Iraq, is a short step.

One can easily imagine how these ideas can dominate the tsunami rehabilitation efforts. If rehabilitation is seen primarily as an effort of aid agencies they will look at the affected population on the basis of broad generalisations. Terms like Internally Displaced Population (IDPs) will be used to identify people affected. I have already seen this term in documents coming from Sri Lanka. They will be IDPs whether they are in Sri Lanka or Aceh. The affected people will get homogenised in this manner so that agencies can plan and act. They will not be seen as a part and parcel of social

relations and structures signifying class, caste, ethnic, religious or any other category relevant to these societies. Class will be a term that will be especially shunned. These are the social structures through which people have existed before the tsunami struck. The impact of the tsunami is also mediated through them. By the use of the terms like IDPs the agencies will not only miss this social dynamics but will also deprive people of their identities.

Promoting Markets

When it comes to economic development, there will be a relentless promotion of markets. There will be some relief from the pressures of the market in the short term. But there will not be any serious questioning of fundamental ideas that have dominated economic development. It is interesting to monitor how far the aid money that will flow in because of the tsunami will be utilised for this purpose. Often disasters provided opportunities to overcome the resistance of the population and promote the interests of capital. One example is the debate about the policy of not allowing construction within 100 meters of the coastline. The dynamics of the development model has a lot to do with the fact that many poor people live along the coastline, sometimes as squatters or illegally occupying land next to the sea. They have been there open to the ferocious attack of the tsunami either because they could not either afford to live in any other place or had been

virtually pushed to the coastline to make way for new developments. The fishing community have lived there in order to ensure their meagre living. They could be removed under the guise of rehabilitation from these locations without providing a proper alternative so that the big developers can be given access to this land. Therefore the poor, who have already been hit by the opening up of markets before the tsunami, will have to struggle with the same forces, now with the devastating impact of the disaster.

Asking Questions

A major question that many people in Sri Lanka will be asking in the context of this large flow of aid for tsunami rehabilitation is whether there will be room to question some of these fundamental ideas that have dominated aid agencies' in the country. A space that will allow not only a questioning of the broad generalisations and dominant ideas in economic and political development with which they work, but also give opportunities to ideas that get generated locally. During the last two decades, aid agencies have become a key political actor in Sri Lanka. Their role has been important both in the promotion of capitalism and in trying to find a solution to the civil war. With this large aid flow their political role will be enhanced. How they will make use of this new found influence will be critical for the future of Sri Lanka.

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