

POST-TSUNAMI RECOVERY IN SRI LANKA

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I.

The government of Sri Lanka and the international community have begun in earnest to map out their strategies for post-disaster reconstruction Sri Lanka which was devastated by the boxing-day tsunami. The situation in Sri Lanka as well as Indonesia at present can be described as a 'complex humanitarian emergency.' In this context, all engaged in reconstruction work, as well as the public in Sri Lanka, need to be aware of few crucial issues. This article seeks to generate an informed and reflective discussion on these challenges.

Conflict Sensitivity

Firstly, the immediate humanitarian response to the tsunami disaster as well the medium and long-term strategies for relief and reconstruction should be *conflict sensitive*. We must never ignore the fact that this tsunami disaster occurred in Sri Lanka, and Indonesia's Aceh province too, against the backdrop of an ethno-political civil war, and that the negotiation process to end it through political means has been under severe stress. It is fundamentally important that the government and the international community immediately draw up strategies for a well-thought out 'conflict sensitive disaster response.'

Under the present circumstances, a framework of conflict sensitivity for Sri Lanka's disaster response calls for the following:

(i). The government and the international community as well as civil society groups should include the LTTE at all levels of decision-making and implementation with regard to the humanitarian response and the reconstruction process. The government should treat the particularly LTTE as an equal partner in the short-term as well as long-term processes of disaster response. Although there might be the temptation and even advise in some quarters to use this opportunity to re-assert the authority of the state in the LTTE-held areas in the North and East, no responsible government should pursue such an approach which will only widen the existing gulf between the government and the LTTE, and the state and the Tamil community. The principle to stress here is that *there is a close link between disaster response, post-disaster reconstruction and peace building*.

(ii). The distribution of humanitarian assistance and long-term economic support should be *fair and equitable*. Tamil and Muslim communities as well as any particular district or area should not have reason to think that the government and the international community have practiced a discriminatory approach. The best way to ensure fairness and equity is to make a thorough assessment of the local, community needs and then respond adequately, involving

the local communities as well as local political actors in all phases of providing relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

(iii). There is a growing sentiment in the South that the LTTE has been behaving in a predatory manner in dealing with the disaster. Amidst these negative media reports, it is also important to recognise that the LTTE has well-organised structures, mechanisms and trained personnel to respond to humanitarian emergencies, developed during the war. All those who return from the Vanni after delivering relief goods to the people there agree on the effectiveness of the organized response initiated by the LTTE soon after the tsunami hit the coastal areas under their control. Recognition by the government of the capacity of the other side, even under extremely harsh conditions and with limited material resources, to deliver humanitarian emergency assistance on a mass scale, can go a long way. It is important that the government and the international community recognize not only the LTTE's limitations as a political entity, but also its strength in emergency disaster response. Cooperation with the LTTE in effective delivery of emergency assistance and in the long-term processes of reconstruction is extremely important to make this huge disaster an opportunity for *trust building for peace*.

(iv). Re-building of the disaster-hit areas should be conceptualised and initiated jointly, with the active participation of the LTTE. The government and the international community should design new strategies to facilitate such a process of *humanitarian engagement* between the government and the LTTE. Actually, this calls for a new framework of human security engagement between the two sides to the conflict. The CFA has defined the terms of military engagement between the state and the LTTE to facilitate negotiations. Now, the peace process has a new context and it requires, 'human security' agreement parallel to the CFA.

Decentralised Response

Secondly, the government as well as the LTTE should avoid re-producing centralized structures of governance in its disaster response policy. The present tendency is to establish centralized institutions for humanitarian operations. This approach treats local level government bodies as secondary to the structures set up at the centre. While we should acknowledge the importance of unified coordination of international support as well as the delivery of assistance, it is extremely crucial to *empower and activate decentralized local institutions of governance as well as local community initiatives*.

A failed centralized state can by no means succeed in delivering services in an extremely complex humanitarian emergency. There are many reports coming from the provinces suggesting the urgent

need to empower local initiatives with central assistance for immediate disaster response. Even without a disaster of this magnitude, Sri Lanka needed a system of decentralized governance in an advance federal framework. The centre can work efficiently, especially in complex emergencies, only when there is a working and effective network of de-centralised governance, supported by the local citizens groups. Therefore, the government's approach to disaster management and response should in no way reinstate centralization.

State's Role

Thirdly, the government should not think that the state has the monopoly in immediate disaster response as well as long-term reconstruction. *The state is only one actor* while it can be granted that it certainly is the principal actor. In fact, in the first two days of the disaster, the state could generate only a limited response to assist the victims. There are many reports of serious state failure in immediate disaster response. It is the voluntary initiative of the people and non-governmental bodies that provided immediate assistance to the victims when the government was virtually on vacation. The government should accept this reality, and be courageous to work with the non-governmental and community actors in all stages of recovery from this disaster, strengthening its role as a facilitator.

By surveying the active responses to the present disaster, one may identify the following entities as the key actors engaged in the post-tsunami recovery process: the government (its constituent political parties as well as the administrative machinery), the LTTE, the opposition parties, international community including the states and donors, the international and local civil society, and finally the private sector. The government should take the initiative to establishing a *multi-party coalition* of all these actors for immediate humanitarian assistance as well as medium and long-term recovery. A broad, multi-actor coalition will have a better chance to succeed with broad participation, sustainability and legitimacy.

Non-State Sector

Fourthly, the international community, both the states and the donors, should not treat the Sri Lankan state as the only legitimate actor in the delivery of immediate humanitarian assistance as well as long-term reconstruction. Non-governmental as well as community organisations have done, and are doing, an immensely commendable job to supplement where the state has failed and fill in the critical areas of response deficit. This contribution made by the NGOs should not only be recognised, but also supported.

One option in this regard is the setting up of an international fund of significant size to assist the non-governmental and community bodies in the recovery and re-construction efforts. Indeed, the best practice for sustainable post-disaster recovery is to involve the affected communities in the reconstruction process through their active participation in the re-building efforts. The affected communities

should have ownership of the new process. The government alone cannot shoulder such a social responsibility. The government should work in coalition with the NGOs, CBOs and other popular, participatory groups. The role of the international community in this regard is to facilitate such a coalition and assist the non-governmental sector with funding.

Pro-Poor Recovery

Fifthly, the long-term re-construction program should be non-elitist and *pro-poor*. Such a vision is particularly important due to the fact there are views expressed in powerful quarters in our society that the poor should be removed from the coastal areas which should now be used for urban and coastal beautification. Some pundits have already come on the TV to advocate this line of anti-poor thinking for post-disaster economic and social reconstruction. In some instances, government officials have warned the displaced fisher communities that they should not return to the coastal habitat but should find alternative accommodation in the interior. This has in fact sent shock waves among the poor, displaced communities who are now in welfare camps. Although there will be a middle-class and elite argument – a tempting one at that -- for the gentrification of the coastal belt at the expense of the poor fishing and low-income communities, the government should not give in to such un-humanitarian pressure.

While it is true that these communities should not return to their pre-tsunami existence of grinding poverty and unbearable squalor, there is absolutely no justification in further victimising them in the name of re-construction. They should be provided with alternative habitats and means of livelihood that will enable them to escape from poverty and misery. The state should avoid strategies that may push them into further misery, or make them state-dependent and passive recipients of assistance. These communities should be enabled to be active agents of their own transformation for a better future. An imaginative economic reconstruction plan can be one that will ensure them sustainable employment, new economic opportunities as well as better housing and social infrastructure.

Finally, such a re-construction plan requires a *new vision* for a post-civil war, post-tsunami Sri Lanka. It should encompass Sri Lanka's North, East and the South. The best way to formulate such a comprehensive recovery plan to involve as partners the five constituencies that have a stake in this process – the government, the LTTE, the opposition parties, international community, the civil society and the private sector. A conference of the representatives of these six constituencies should be the best forum for devising a *multi-party recovery plan*.

II.

Responses to the tsunami disaster of December 26 have now reached a new phase. In the initial phase of the response, efforts were mainly directed at immediate tasks. Recovery of survivors as well as the bodies of the dead, the provision of food, medicine and shelter were among the key immediate tasks in the

first week of assistance. In the second week, many medium term challenges emerged. They included the tasks of managing relief supplies to survivors in the welfare camps, streamlining and better coordination of relief delivery, obtaining better information about the magnitude of the disaster as well as managing the international assistance. In the third phase at present, long-term challenges of recovery and re-building are the key considerations.

Political

The task ahead is indeed an enormous one. It is a complex political exercise. There is a profoundly political context for the post-tsunami recovery in Sri Lanka which many seem to ignore. Three fundamental aspects of this context need to be acknowledged. They are fundamental because they will shape the future trajectories of the recovery process, and its success or failure. The first is the ethnic conflict, which calls for linking the disaster recovery agenda to a broad agenda for transition from civil war to peace. Re-consolidation of the peace process, not its undermining, is the challenge it has already thrown up. The second is the essentially fragmented nature of the Sri Lankan polity. It calls for a broad political and social coalition for recovery and re-building. It indeed calls for a new political consensus. The third is the state failure in the past. It presupposes that the government needs to establish a partnership with non-state actors as well as the local institutions of governance to make the recovery process socially legitimate, politically acceptable and relevant to the needs of the affected people in all parts of the island.

Some disturbing tendencies have emerged during the past two weeks that if unchecked can seriously undermine Sri Lanka's efforts towards an inclusive and conflict-sensitive recovery strategy. Key among them is the growing rift between the government and the LTTE on macro politics of humanitarian assistance. While there are reports of the government and the LTTE working in partnership at district and local levels, the political relationship at the level of higher national leadership is marred by adversarial rhetoric and mutual suspicion.

Annan Visit

The politics of the visit made by the UN Secretary General centre-staged the challenge that the government, the LTTE as well as the international community face in Sri Lanka in a conflict-ridden humanitarian context. Mr. Kofi Annan's visit should ideally have been a healing effort, utilizing Sri Lanka's unprecedented human tragedy a rare opportunity for reconciliation. When Mr. Annan excluded from his travel itinerary the LTTE-held areas that were also devastated by the tsunami, he made a very significant contribution to the growing rift between the government and the LTTE. Despite the Sri Lanka Foreign Ministry's claim that the Annan itinerary was primarily arranged by the local UN officials, the LTTE has good reason to react, viewing it as another attempt by the government to isolate the Tamils and the LTTE from the international system.

Tamil citizens whom I spoke to over this issue, have expressed both sorrow and regret. They feel slighted even in this grave humanitarian tragedy. For Tamils who are conscious of the politics of ethnic relations in Sri Lanka, the exclusion of the North and East from the Secretary General's visit is a symbolic exclusion of them as a community. But the officials representing the Sri Lankan state as well as the international state system seldom understand these deeply-felt grievances of non-state communities, despite their rhetorical commitment to minority rights. The adherence to the concept of state sovereignty and the slogan of 'one state - one government' has deprived the Sri Lankan government and the UN a great opportunity for inter-community trust building and reconciliation for peace in Sri Lanka. If a humanitarian tragedy of such unimaginable proportions as the tsunami disaster of December 26 cannot move the Sri Lanka government to relax some rigid terms of state conduct, what else can bring flexibility to the thinking among the politicians and officials who run the Sri Lankan state?

Victims

This logic of exclusion in the humanitarian recovery process goes on in other areas as well. The most excluded from the official reckoning for recovery and re-construction are the direct victims of the tsunami disaster. This exclusion is practiced primarily by those key government officials who have already finalized plans for long-term reconstruction of the affected towns and villages. Perhaps, the Task Force appointed by the President to plan the reconstruction process have neither the time nor the intellectual inclination to consult the victims in making their plans. For them, the affected people are useful statistics, because their plans are largely based on the so-called 'rapid need assessments.' In these technical exercises, the victims' views are not useful 'policy inputs.' After all, the expert consultants know what the people actually require.

The government should immediately re-think this technocratic 'rebuilding from above' approach to disaster recovery, because it makes the affected communities passive onlookers of another process that can very well be a social disaster in the long run. It makes the victims of a natural disaster the victims of a deliberate disaster. This approach also violates one of the fundamental principles of humanitarian recovery from political as well as natural by emergencies, not enabling the affected people to own the new life in a participatory process. A techno-bureaucratic process, imposed from above by the central state and the international donor community, can hardly transform the lives of the victim communities in a sustainable manner.

Local Capacities

The exclusion of local capacities and experts is another serious shortcoming in Sri Lanka's present recovery process. This is closely linked to the internationalisation of disaster management, which is linked to the global humanitarian aid enterprise.

Internationalisation of disaster assistance has already produced two significant political outcomes. It has brought the international state system back into Sri Lanka in a big way, after the setbacks to the peace process. It has also brought a host of new international NGOs to the local assistance disbursement networks. Whether one likes it or not, post-tsunami Sri Lanka is locked into a complex network of global linkages.

It is simply amazing how very young foreign experts and consultants are now engaged in rapid need assessments in many tsunami-hit districts in Sri Lanka. They often dispatch themselves from the airport to the districts to quickly begin needs assessment in communities with which they have no familiarity. Neither the donor community nor the international NGOs who are engaged in these assessments make use of local expertise. Assistance of the social scientists in our universities is not solicited except on the phone or through quick question-answer interviews. In a global culture of technocracy, it is not strange that the Presidential Task Force on rebuilding the nation does not have a single local sociologist in the list of its high-powered members.

The government seems to approach the task of re-building on the assumption that it is primarily an exercise in re-building towns, roads, markets, beachfronts and infrastructure. In a sustainable reconstruction process, primacy should be given to re-building lives, livelihoods and communities. Construction buildings, as the developing world learnt through bitter experience a few decades ago, is not nation building. We have a whole history of developmental failure behind us, and there is no reason for us today to ignore that past and repeat its mistakes once again.

Local Institutions

Ignoring local institutions in the long-term recovery process is another mistake that the government should avoid. The present approach does not seem to value the participation of the local institutions of governance, like Pradeshiya Sabhas and Municipal Councils, in planning or implementation of the master plan for re-building. The exclusion of local institutions of governance emanates from two sources. Firstly, the Colombo-centric vision of efficiency views the institutions of governance in the periphery with suspicion, as inefficient and easily corruptible. Secondly, Colombo's technocracy thinks that local institutions are lacking in capacity to undertake the gigantic task of post-tsunami re-building.

However, these are not good reasons to exclude the local institutions of governance. They are indeed good reasons to link the reconstruction process with a program of re-building the capacities of the institutions of local governance as well as community organisations. The government should never ignore the possibility that a re-building process that does not include the local communities, local capacities as well as the local institutions of governance might not enjoy social support and legitimacy. In brief, the task ahead in Sri Lanka is a political one as well, political in the broad sense of the term. It calls for avoiding the past failures of developmental processes and creatively applying their lessons in the long-term recovery process. It also necessitates a sound public policy of social and economic recovery that is participatory, inclusive, socially legitimate and anchored in a new political consensus. Importantly, recovery from the tsunami disaster and the recovery from the civil war are so closely intertwined that they require a fresh partnership between the government, the LTTE and the international system in a new framework of flexibility. ■

E-MAIL FROM BATTICALOA

Volunteers have informed us that some unauthorized persons have distributed medicines in camps (Arrasadi Mill). Through our fact-finding visit we were able to collect some medicines, which have expired. In some cases the expiry date goes back to October 2004. Today we visited Arrasadi Mill camp and found that milk powder packets that were distributed by some visitors were found not consumable. This adhoc distribution needs to be stopped immediately. There should be some kind of monitoring system installed in camps.

It seems there are reported cases of Malaria and Diarrhea in Batticaloa. At Hindu college there are 09 cases of Diarrhea and 01 case of Malaria. In the recent past there have been many media reports stating that the post Tsunami diseases are under control but we fear that these overly crowded-camps need to be monitored continuously for contagious diseases.