
CAPACITY BUILDING, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND HUMANITARIANISM

Jennifer Hyndman and Malathi de Alwis

This short essay argues that capacity-building has been used uncritically by humanitarian staff in international NGOs and UN agencies throughout much of the 1990s. The authors contend that capacity-building holds out both promise and problems in the context of humanitarian policy and practice. Its promise lies in the various contributions of skilled staff working for well-financed international organizations to national or local organizations with compatible mandates, skills, and projects. Herein lies the potential for accountability between the two scales of organizations. Its problems are more subtle, and lie in the very conception of capacity-building as something invented by the West (or North) to 'help' the East (or South) overcome its deficiencies. To illustrate this point, the authors analyze findings based on recent research conducted in Sri Lanka. Due to protracted civil war in the country, the role of international NGOs and UN agencies is long-standing and on-going; their relations with local and national organizations in Sri Lanka are a major focus of the study. We maintain that capacity-building in conflict zones must be undertaken with care, so as not to fuel or prolong the war. Furthermore, the war renders the question of accountability much more convoluted. Concepts such as 'community,' 'development,' and 'capacity-building' become fraught when they are applied to politicized landscapes of war.

Capacity-Building in War Zones

Capacity-building is a means of engaging and strengthening local knowledge and skills to render people's livelihoods more secure. It implies outside intervention to augment or restore the well-being of persons adversely affected by any number of factors, including war, displacement, ecological disaster, or state-sponsored dispossession. Capacity-building builds on but departs from 'development' in a number of key ways: 1) it acknowledges the prior existence of economic relations and modes of making a living that can be strengthened or restored, rather than fixed by foreign expertise; and 2) it implies a time-limited intervention on the part of those providing the external assistance, assuming that sustainable livelihoods can either be restored or created in situ with appropriate planning.

These are important departures from the development project, which stems largely from the coincidence of decolonization and Cold War posturing after the Second World War. The development project was (and is) very much a geopolitical project, as well as a social and economic one, about the East (or South) by the West (or

North). Development was, in its conception, a script written by the most powerful capitalist countries for the newly independent 'Third World' or non-aligned countries. It was, in this sense, orientalist (Edward Said, 1977): a project about the 'East' by and ostensibly for the West. Arturo Escobar (1995) has long argued that 'development' is a self-interested project in which the West defines the paths of change for the less fortunate, and then selectively provides resources for this 'progress' to be realized. A strong interpretation of Escobar's argument is that 'development' is a neo-colonial project by the West to help more unfortunate societies become more like [successful] Western ones. Like colonialism, development is a well-intentioned, even humanitarian, project with social, political, and economic objectives.

Situating Sri Lanka

A civil war has been raging in Sri Lanka for almost twenty years now. Tamil and Sinhalese nationalist movements have contributed to the struggles, but conflict between the security forces of the Sri Lankan Government and the separatist movement of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has proven the greatest threat to the civilian population of Sri Lanka, particularly in the northern and eastern regions of the country. The government-controlled 'cleared' areas stand in contrast to the LTTE-controlled 'uncleared' territory that continually expands and contracts due to the vagaries of war producing ever-evolving 'frontlines,' 'no-man zones' and 'border areas.' Displaced persons exist on both sides of these lines, and encompass Tamil, Sinhalese, and Muslim groups, though the majority of the displaced in Sri Lanka are Tamil. Ongoing displacement has become a fact of life for many households. In 1999-2000 alone, thousands of newly displaced persons have had to restart their lives again, particularly in the northern region of the Wanni. The death toll from this war now exceeds 60,000.

To compare the colonizing powers of Sri Lanka (Portuguese, Dutch, and British), or even the missionaries who visited the country, with the international humanitarian organizations that are currently located in Sri Lanka is to risk overstating the latter's influence in a country governed by an elected government, but their respective aims are not dissimilar. The provision of social and economic infrastructure is an on-going objective of international NGOs, such as CARE, CIDA (Canadian Development Agency), FORUT, MSF (Holland and France), OXFAM, Save the Children (UK, USA & Norway), WUSC (World University Services of Canada), and others operating in Sri Lanka. Activities that would normally be

provided by other sources in peacetime, such as education, vocational training, health service, and income generation projects for people in places adversely affected by the war, are implemented by international NGOs in concert with local and national non-governmental organizations. Considerable resources for these services are provided to nationally-based NGOs by the international NGOs. This is not a bad thing in and of itself. But the relations of power embedded in these projects must be more self-consciously analyzed, if any strong sense of accountability to Sri Lankan civil society, its nationally-based organizations with expertise and experience in such areas, and its governing bodies is to be forged.

The Complexities of Humanitarianism

As a humanitarian response, capacity-building aims to address deficiencies within displaced populations, or at least disruptions to their livelihoods, to which outside expertise, experience, or resources can be added to ameliorate the situation. Such objectives may be well-meaning and practical in peacetime, but they become highly politicized in a war zone. Displaced populations on all sides of the ethnic divide in Sri Lanka, for example, may be 'taxed' by governing parties, such as the LTTE or the Sri Lankan government, to provide resources for on-going fighting. The restoration of livelihoods, in such a context, is much less straightforward than the concept of capacity-building to increase social and economic security in peacetime.

Capacity-building also aims to augment and improve upon skills, experience, and resources already situated in a given location. The idea that support for something as innocuous as education could become support for militarization is difficult to comprehend in such a context. Parents in LTTE-controlled areas of Sri Lanka have avoided sending their children to school because it is considered a training and recruitment ground for the Tiger rebel group. This is no unfounded fear for there have been instances where entire classes of students have disappeared to serve as LTTE cadres under the leadership of their teachers.

Both of these scenarios illustrate the politicization of what might be considered capacity-building practices. Similar arguments can also be posed towards many of the capacity-building projects that are being run in the government-controlled areas which have enabled the state to pour money into the defense industry in the secure knowledge that the disbursement of education, health, social services etc., is being facilitated by humanitarian agencies.

One must be vigilant, then, and extremely careful about the ways in which conventional development practices are transposed onto a highly politicized conflict zone, where the welfare of civilians is being negotiated on a constant basis. For example, the use of participatory rural appraisal (PRA), a common assessment tool in development circles, is highly questionable in the Wannai area of Northern Sri Lanka. PRA employs a methodology which involves the collection of household data, including the number of family members, their livelihoods, the household assets and income in

terms of land, livestock, and earnings. It includes family names and a 'social map' of who lives where, with whom, and owns what. Such information in the hands of the LTTE for the purposes of monitoring the current military training and recruitment campaign could be disastrous. Such information in the hands of the armed forces can also be dangerous particularly in the increasingly hostile and suspicious climate that reigns in the Eastern Province (after the recent assassination attempts on the Sri Lankan President and the Prime Minister) where every Tamil person is perceived as a potential 'terrorist.' The Eastern Province has of late been constructed in the media, and popular discourses more generally, as the place of origin of many male and female bombers who have 'infiltrated' Colombo.

The Geopolitics of Conflict

In order to be accountable to the people one aims to assist, the concept and practice of capacity-building must be linked to the geopolitics of conflict, the catalysts of displacement, and the uneven impact that dislocation has across differences of gender, class, caste, and ethnic identity. By this, we do not mean that the sharing of resources proportionately among competing factions to the conflict is sufficient, i.e. one should help all sides in order to remain neutral and apolitical. Rather, the political crisis in Sri Lanka cannot be separated from the humanitarian crisis it generates. On-going consultations with displaced persons throughout Sri Lanka, collated by OXFAM (UK) and Save the Children (UK) into the recently released *Listening to the Displaced* report, raise a salient point: people's needs, concerns, and material well-being would not be an issue if the war could be stopped and their livelihoods restored. The mobility of people and goods is highly restricted because of the war, a pattern which distorts markets and prevents access for many to better jobs and educational opportunities. Political solutions are critical to the success of capacity-building in terms of the long-term security of people's livelihoods.

It is, however, much easier to diagnose the problems with humanitarian and development assistance in a conflict situation than to propose alternative solutions and examples of effective practice in such a context. Regardless of purported neutrality or apolitical status, humanitarian work is always fraught with politics. Capacity-building in Sri Lanka, for example, will always be circumscribed by perceived socio-cultural alliances or simply one's cultural background as Muslim, Tamil, or Sinhalese. Once basic food, shelter, and health services have been established, changing prevailing attitudes and strengthening civil organizations to reduce conflict is central to humanitarian work in conflict areas. A practical *modus vivendi* can be forged in several ways and we offer here a few suggestions and examples:

1. International NGOs should work with national and local organizations of all ethnic groups, but especially those who have a sincere commitment to work towards a peaceful political solution

to the ethnic conflict by contesting the chauvinist elements within Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms. After almost twenty years of fighting, militancy or militarism is clearly not the answer. Organizations which actively work against the often racist and stereotypical notions of 'other' should be sought, strengthened, and encouraged to expand their work. One example is the Butterfly Garden project in Batticaloa in Eastern Sri Lanka where children of various ethnicities, religions and cultural backgrounds are granted 'scholarships' to spend 9 months together in an educational and play setting. This is a transformative approach to education which grapples with the cultural politics of that region. Promoting attitudes of acceptance and cooperation, and forging friendships among these youth, constitute a concrete step towards changing attitudes and prejudices that fuel ethnic nationalisms. Another example is the Kalmunai Peace Foundation, also located in Eastern Sri Lanka (partially funded by OXFAM), which is a community-based organization of Tamil and Muslim men and women who seek to reduce inter-ethnic conflict in their region by acting as intermediaries and peace advocates during contexts of inter-ethnic tension and misunderstanding and promoting inter-ethnic interaction through cultural, extra-curricular and intellectual activities.

2. Transforming attitudes about gender is another possible entry point for international NGOs. By identifying national and regional efforts already in place, INGOs can work to strengthen or augment *extant* organizations by promoting positive social change through changes in gender roles/identities. Conflict tends to represent a period of instability and most often loss or suffering, but the presence of INGOs during such crises also represents an opportunity. Persons displaced from their jobs, schools, and land can be provided with training, skills, and schooling by existing institutions whose capacity can be strengthened and expanded by INGOs. An opening for change exists: societal attitudes about what women can and should do are dynamic. For example, one of the most interesting and inspirational local feminist organizations in the Eastern Province is the Suriya Women's Development Centre which is run by a group of Tamil women who were displaced from various regions in the north and east of Sri Lanka. The support and funding they have received from organizations such as CIDA and HIVOS (Netherlands) has enabled them to broaden their scope of activism to provide legal assistance to displaced, battered and sexually violated women, to help displaced communities to mobilize themselves to secure their rights as well as identify productive forms of self-employment, and to form a cultural troupe which uses music, dance and drama to raise awareness—both locally and regionally—about the deleterious effects of ethnic chauvinism and patriarchy. The challenge of changing social attitudes has also been taken up by international organizations such as World University Services of Canada (WUSC) which has, in cooperation with local institutions in places like Trincomalee and Batticaloa, provided additional funds for courses in welding, bicycle repair, carpentry, and mechanics. This is nothing particularly new, except that many of these classes are full of young women. Other

classes mix young men and women together. During our field work, the sight of three young Muslim women graduates of one course welding iron gates in their home-based workshop was indeed a concrete expression of changing attitudes about what women can do.

There can be no single recipe for capacity-building. That is, no module or training manual can provide all of the political information, conceptual categories, and cultural capital necessary for the successful implementation of practices which augment the existing foundations and skills of all places. Context matters: the historically and geographically constituted grounds for conflict that precipitate humanitarian intervention have to be understood and addressed before such efforts can be genuinely effective. If local and/or national actors in humanitarian efforts have no space to engage and shape the concept and practice of capacity-building in situ, it risks becoming just another Western project. The contingencies of a particular humanitarian crisis, of cultural politics, and of place reconstitute meaning and implication at a range of scales. Advocates of capacity-building, or any other humanitarian activity, can ignore this only at their peril.

Our research has found that the politics of the Sri Lankan conflict were not always well-understood by the international staff implementing capacity-building projects. One explanation for this is the short-term duration of international staff contracts. Developing an understanding of the complicated and ever-changing dynamics and implications of this twenty-year-old war in Sri Lanka is a huge project in itself, and yet how can someone with a one year employment contract be expected to undertake this challenge effectively? International staff rely heavily on national employees for access to, information about, and understanding of Sri Lankan politics. More accountability on the part of international NGOs and UN agencies might be generated through longer contracts and commitments to international staff and the renewal of such contracts in a single place. Likewise, international NGOs might do well to revisit their personnel policies so that the promotion of nationally-based staff are not artificially limited by a problematic local/international distinction between staff in international NGOs, and even UN agencies. Effectively, a kind of 'glass ceiling' for those hired locally exists in many of the international NGOs. The hierarchies that such divisions generate can serve to create turnover among committed national staff whose institutional memory tends to outlive those of more temporary international staff. Offering renewals for personnel on international contracts, where warranted, and dismantling barriers to promotion allowing access to more senior posts for national staff employed by INGOs may well improve accountability to Sri Lankan society and serve the interests of the organizations themselves.

Accountability

South Asian intellectuals have for many years now written critically of how knowledge about themselves, their

histories, and their region has been produced and disseminated under various regimes of power and authority, be it colonialist or developmentalist. The Subaltern School of historians in India (and those they have inspired) as well as feminist scholars in various parts of South Asia have played a central role in this endeavour of writing back, of producing their own knowledge of place and history and decolonizing (neo) colonial epistemologies of knowledge production. Many of these intellectuals, several of whom are located in Sri Lanka, are also activists, journalists, lawyers and policy-makers and thus crucial opinion makers and breakers; they are the watch dogs of their societies who will insist on accountability if humanitarian organizations cease to provide it.

Senior staff implementing capacity-building have asked, "what is the value-added to work done by INGOs in conjunctions with local NGOs?" Genuine engagement between both parties (international and local) may be more cumbersome than working independently, but it is one of few measures of accountability to the places in which capacity-building takes place. International NGOs can ask at least two questions to ascertain their accountability in a broad sense:

a) To what extent does the INGO impart skills and resources to its national counterparts and consult with them to render itself redundant over time? (Is it even possible for an INGO to be redundant in a conflict situation?)

b) To what extent does the INGO render its national counterparts more sustainable, stable, and able organizations?

Accountability is a sensitive issue for humanitarian organizations precisely because those who fund and administer such agencies are not the same groups as those who receive their services. Unlike a democratic municipality, province, or nation-state whose constituents vote on policies, people, and programs to govern them, the recipients of humanitarian assistance have less say as to what, how, or who will help them (despite the pro-active efforts of many NGOs that promote 'the right to a say'). Thus the accountability of both international and national organizations which provide such assistance is an even more critical issue. Avoiding charitable relations between donors and recipients requires genuine engagement between international humanitarian agencies and their national counterparts. The onus is on the international agencies to initiate such contact; to respond to the expertise and experience of national staff in situ by allowing them to shape the meaning and practice of capacity-building at all levels; and to ensure that every effort is made to avoid arrogance, disinterest, or indifference on the part of international staff towards such local 'capacity.' To do so would be to reinscribe yet another round of neo-colonial power relations in countries already at war. ■

Courtesy *Forced Migration Review*, No. 8, Aug. 2000: 16-9

AVAILABLE SOON

- Manel Fonseka (compiled and edited)- **Great Days-Memoirs of a Ceylon Government Medical Officer of 1918—P R C Peterson**
- Hector Abhayavardhana - **Selected Writings**
- N. Shanmugaratnam - **Forced Migration**
- Neluka Silva (ed) - **The Hybrid Island**

NOW AVAILABLE

- **Philip Gunawardena —The Making of a Revolutionary**
Wesley Ervin
- **Cat's Eye - A Feminist Gaze on Current Events**
ed. Malathi de Alwis
- **What is a Girl, What is a Boy?**
Kamla Bhasin
- **Revolutionary Idealism and Parliamentary Politics**
Ranjith Amarasinghe
- **Nobodies to Somebodies-**
Kumari Jayawardena

Suriya Bookshop
425/15, Thimbirigasyaya Road
Colombo 5, Tel: 501339, Fax: 595563