

Serving Sri Lanka

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Reflections on need for a fresh Post-Tsunami approach in Sri Lanka

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[Google Groups : Humanitarian Information Centre Sri Lanka \(HIC\)](#): The tsunami struck a relatively thin but extremely long coastal area in Sri Lanka, stretching over 1,000 kilometers, or two thirds of the country's coastline. The damage stretches from Jaffna in the north down the entire eastern and southern coast, and covers the west coast as far north of Colombo as Chilaw. There are over 31,000 dead, 5,000 missing, 15,000 injured according to official reports. The estimated numbers of displaced persons are 443,000, and the population affected could be between 1 million and 2 million of Sri Lanka's total population of about 19 million.

About 100,000 houses were damaged; of which more than 75,000 were completely destroyed. Coastal infrastructure (roads, railway, power, telecommunication, water supply, fishing ports) was also significantly affected. Fisheries, and small-scale retail trade have been hit hard. 10 out of 12 major fishery harbors were damaged including support facilities such as ice plants, cold rooms, fish receiving and marketing centers and offices. Preliminary figures from the UN show that 22,940 vessels of various categories were lost or damaged. This constitutes 81% of total number of fishing vessels in the country. The fishing population suffered 7,573 deaths; 5,686 missing, and 90,657 displaced. Coastal infrastructure (roads, railway, power, telecommunication, water supply, fishing ports) has been significantly affected.

The devastating effects of the catastrophe could add around 250,000 more poor people to a nation that is already struggling with the effects of civil conflict compounded by poverty. Humanitarian assistance in Sri Lanka has thus been subjected to profound and dramatic change in the wake of the Tsunami. An unprecedented number of people have been caught in, and made vulnerable by, civil conflict and the Tsunami has resulted in large numbers being killed, maimed and displaced and vital means of survival being destroyed.

There are obvious limitations to the capacity of humanitarian organizations to assist people whose usual means of coping has been violently disrupted or destroyed by the Tsunami. A major challenge for these organizations is safeguarding norms, safeguarding the well-being of civilians and the provision of assistance in a manner consistent with humanitarian principles. In addition, the international community is faced with the paradox of needing ever larger resources to address the immediate survival needs of victims while simultaneously recognizing that such action may deflect attention and support from initiatives essential to undoing the root causes of vulnerability and strife. The onslaught of sudden crises, new challenges and competing needs have repeatedly highlighted the importance of a well-organized and adequately resourced mechanism for coordination, both within the multi-actor humanitarian arena in Sri Lanka.

The volatile context within which humanitarian assistance is provided is a major determinant in the overall capacity to preempt and respond to crises in a manner which minimizes avoidable suffering. The violence of civil conflict is compounded by the devastation caused, and the number of people affected, by the Tsunami. While much worthwhile action has been taken to improve the response capacity, there are, none the less, major challenges which need to be addressed in the dramatically changed climate of the post-tsunami-civil-conflict era.

The limited means of humanitarian organizations to provide protection is highlighted in the conflict setting. Finding the means to reach those in need without entrenching the power of abusive elements is one of the most difficult challenges facing the humanitarian community in Sri Lanka.

Disrespect for humanitarian norms in conflict ridden areas is likely to have a negative impact on the capacity of organizations to protect and provide assistance to Tsunami survivors. Dependence on the agreement of armed groups often makes the provision of humanitarian assistance tenuous and subject to highly volatile conditions. Safeguarding the concept and reality of "humanitarian space" when the needs of Tsunami -affected communities are deemed secondary to military priorities is one of the most significant challenges currently confronting the humanitarian community.

The ability of the humanitarian community effectively to assist Tsunami affected communities to move from relief assistance to steps towards rebuilding a civil society depends on the political resolve of the international community

to address fully the underlying civil conflict. This ability is also affected by the intricate process of identifying, engaging with and making accountable local community authorities and structures. In this context, it is often difficult to define the appropriate transition away from humanitarian operations.

Until recently, traditional wisdom argued that responsibility for the convalescence of a society was transferred from humanitarian actors to development partners in a linear progression along what was called the "relief to development continuum." The assumption was that such baton hand-overs could be accomplished smoothly and that donor momentum or interest would remain constant throughout the process. In fact, in many situations, success by the international community in stabilizing the humanitarian crisis is not accompanied by longer-term political stability. Protracted political instability often results in a reduction of international assistance, thus limiting resources available to support a transition to recovery.

Difficulties which have to be addressed in dealing with recovery and transition include:

- (a) A perceived scarcity of empowered local leadership able to interact with the international community to take over and guide the transition process;
- (b) Donor fatigue due to a protracted conflict that seems to lead nowhere;
- (c) An absence of significant donor resources for the rehabilitation and recovery phases.

Most donor funds are earmarked for either Tsunami assistance or long-term development. The goodwill associated with the successful international Tsunami relief operation provides a window of opportunity upon which the international community must capitalize. The goodwill of armed groups and their willingness to compromise among their own members and with others will be lost if resources for recovery and follow-up support are not forthcoming in a timely manner.

To begin to address these problems, the international community should focus on the sustainability of the impact of humanitarian assistance, especially through the empowerment of local authorities and structures. Supporting local structures in their efforts to guide the humanitarian endeavor will greatly enhance the international community's ability to address the essence of conflict and to identify and support opportunities for diffusing tensions. Continued support to representative local structures beyond the emergency relief stage through the recovery process has the potential to assist nascent and fragile peace efforts to flourish.

One critical constraint which organizations of the system face in a period of transition is the availability of upfront resources to address immediate recovery needs. This could be critical to stabilizing and improving the fragile situations in Sri Lanka. Experience has shown that the response of donors to longer-term rehabilitation requirements often takes time. Despite recognition of the importance of rehabilitation and confidence-building measures, there is a dramatic dearth of funding for such activities. It is important that funds which can be accessed quickly are set aside for immediate rehabilitation activities. Even when donor support for rehabilitation programmes exists, the funding mechanisms are often too slow to maintain the necessary momentum to break the cycle of violence or address the conditions that perpetuate stability. The window of opportunity for such activities, is limited and should be fully utilized.

The humanitarian agenda is shaped by political attitudes, strategic interests in specific areas and the attention span of the media. Such factors, which are for the most part beyond the control of humanitarian organizations, play an important role in the level of attention and support provided to victims. Ideally, assistance would be provided according to need and the core principle of impartiality would have greater relevance.

It is critically important that the international community acknowledges the vital but limited role of humanitarian action in the complex crises in Sri Lanka. It is equally important to ensure that humanitarian programmes are not used as a substitute for action needed to reverse the dynamics of war and the circumstances which led to armed conflict.

The major obstacle facing humanitarian organizations is the absence of sufficient political will and support for action to address the underlying causes of crises. The provision of humanitarian assistance in a vacuum is tantamount to managing only the symptoms of a crisis. The effectiveness of humanitarian endeavors in the conflict setting in Sri Lanka is largely predicated on successful action by the international community to resolve the problems that provoked the crisis. However, notwithstanding the importance of support from the international community, it has to be recognized that it is the people of Sri Lanka who are primarily responsible for their own recovery and that of their communities.

In sum, humanitarian organizations in Sri Lanka have to reassess the processes that shape the nature and impact of their interventions for Tsunami survivors in conflict ridden zones and arrive at a community based empowerment approach with a human rights perspective that addresses the issue of community development using a psychosocial platform with an undercurrent of peace building.

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