

# Challenges to the Post-Tsunami Reconstruction Process

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## **Introduction**

This brief is mainly intended for actors involved in the post-tsunami reconstruction process in Sri Lanka, and is intended as a constructive contribution to the improvement of current practices. The authors take full responsibility for the views expressed, which may differ from the official views of their respective institutions.

As the six month review by the international media ebbs out, and the post-tsunami relief effort enters a phase that aims at more long-term interventions, lessons from the first six months remain relevant to the continued interventions. On the basis of fieldwork conducted from April to June in Colombo, a brief field visit to Ampara District in May, and our experience from development related work and studies through several years, we offer our perceptions of the remaining challenges to a sustainable and conflict sensitive coordination of the post-tsunami reconstruction process.

As the principal conclusion of our investigations, and above any other consideration, we wish to stress that *it is vital* that the tsunami be considered one of three major current challenges to the prosperity of Sri Lanka, the others being the continued civil conflict and poverty. Consequently, aid to tsunami affected people cannot be separated from other development efforts. Conflict-related IDPs *must be* accommodated alongside the tsunami-related IDPs in order to avoid creating further tensions between groups and communities. Approached in such a way the tsunami may still be seen as providing an opportunity for a more holistic development effort as well as a stepping stone for a lasting peace, despite some early set backs.

Keeping this overall predicament in mind, we now turn to a series of core challenges and recommendations to the reconstruction process. The first section considers the overall challenge of the sector wide approach that has by now become part of the policy framework of most agencies involved, and the following section present seven core coordination challenges, accompanied by specific recommendations for their alleviation.

## **Structural challenges**

The sector wide approach poses an inherent challenge to coordination because its simplicity on policy and central planning level does not reflect the situation on the ground, e.g. in terms of the significant overlap between sectors such as livelihoods, micro-finance, fisheries/agriculture. This is also reflected in the lack of standardization of assessments from the Districts; there seems to be a lack of agreement on which information falls under what sector, causing distrust in the credibility of assessments in Colombo and frustration on District and Division level.

Furthermore, the South Western coastal areas have received a relatively high amount of aid and attention from international organisations because of their convenient proximity to Colombo. Conversely other areas such as Ampara are receiving proportionately less attention. It is vital that the rationale for projects working in certain areas, and certain areas receiving proportionately less aid be made public. The dearth of information regarding these issues leads to the supposition that some communities are getting more assistance than others. This perception of bias feeds into existing conflict patterns and existing ideas of

discrimination and favouritism and it is essential that a conflict sensitive framework is taken into consideration in every relief or development intervention.

These structural challenges lead us to recommend a broader geographical approach to replace the sector wide approach which seems to be causing more confusion and conflict than genuine relief. A geographical approach would involve looking at affected districts as units, being aware of the pre-tsunami development needs, and their pre existing livelihood patterns and capabilities. It is necessary then that following the tsunami, development takes place in the district as a whole and not simply in the narrow strip of coastal land that was affected by the tsunami. The real development needs and conflict related needs and the districts own capabilities and coping strategies have to be examined and supported. This seeks to eliminate growing competition and resentment between tsunami affected people and other people who live in the area who were not directly affected.

Within the framework of these overall structural recommendations a number of specific challenges to a coordinated relief effort remain relevant as post-tsunami interventions begin to operate with a longer timeframe, and therefore become closer linked to other development efforts.

### ***Core Coordination challenges***

#### **Challenge 1**

Based on our experiences in Ampara District we note a severe lack of camp management due mainly to a lack in continuity of aid and service provision by international organisations and responsible government bodies. The lack of standardization in the services provided by the different institutions involved in the maintenance of different camps and the significant variation in supplies as well as in systems of monitoring and reporting has caused a situation where some camps are not receiving vital supplies or, at best, a situation where camp maintenance is sporadic and where these discrepancies are not communicated back to the responsible institutions.

#### **Recommendation 1**

It is important that the bodies responsible for the coordination of these interventions, e.g TAFREN on the side of the government; OCHA within the UN system; and the NGO consortia on District level, take a more proactive approach to information gathering and analysis. Where information is lacking or unreliable it is the responsibility of these bodies to retract information and share it in a standardized format. Lack of capacity or resources – human or otherwise – is not an acceptable excuse considering the generosity of the international community following the tsunami!

#### **Challenge 2**

Information sharing between humanitarian agencies is hampered by competition over beneficiaries and “attractive” projects, and by the pressure from organisation Head Quarters (as well as the international media/public) to spend funds quickly.

One of the most important challenges to reconstruction coordination is the reluctance of international organisations to share information on needs and on ongoing projects despite their pledges for accountability and transparency. Attractive projects are still those that promise a relatively uncomplicated expenditure of large sums, since the expectations from both organisational Head Quarters and the general public in the West is focused on quick results, not on long term sustainability.

This might be a central factor in the tendency for international organisations to work around local organisations and neglecting principles of participatory development in their practice.

### **Recommendation 2**

It is the responsibility of INGOs to take seriously the task of providing clear and regular information about their activities – future as well as ongoing – in order to inform the expectations of beneficiaries and the international public and media, e.g. in relation to the quality and variation in transitional shelters, and in terms of expenditure – e.g. their considerations regarding long-term versus short-term interventions, and the interconnectedness of broader poverty and conflict related issues to the post-tsunami reconstruction.

In this regard it is recommended that INGOs prioritise the task of advocating the public, media, and organisational Head Quarters in Europe and the US that these complex issues are interlinked and *must* be addressed jointly, i.e. that funds earmarked for the tsunami are best spent in interventions that work on a broader, or more holistic, basis.

### **Challenge 3**

The flow of information between the hierarchical government administrative structures continues to be the way in which information concerning post-tsunami assistance, relief, and reconstruction is being relayed. The urgency of the task required that extraordinary efforts be made to improve communication between these levels, and between various government sectors and other partners in relief and reconstruction.

Following the tsunami, however, decision making has been further centralised in Colombo, causing a significant rigidity in the government response to reconstruction requirements due to the delays in communication from local to central levels and back.

### **Recommendation 3**

It is imperative that the central government administration allows a genuine decentralisation of decision making with regard to post-tsunami reconstruction and that international organisations both insist on and assist in this process without overriding local government officials. It is enough for INGOs to “step back” and let the process proceed in its own pace; what is needed is firm advocacy and active engagement in achieving a continuous commitment from government officials at central, District, and Division level.

### **Challenge 4**

Mechanisms created to and already in place to facilitate coordination are not being used and parallel structures are being set up and used. This creates obvious problems for coordination with differential levels of communication, transparency and openness in participation being displayed by various structures. This practice clearly contradicts the policy emphasis of INGOs on government and local partner ownership of the reconstruction process.

### **Recommendation 4**

INGOs and donors need to produce clear and common demands for monitoring and evaluation standards and negotiate these with the government coordinating bodies. This is not primarily to serve international conditionalities but rather to help build trust between the reconstruction partners. The purpose of this should be to build trust between reconstruction partners rather than serve international conditionalities. Much of this responsibility falls on the international partners, since they display a clear lack of trust among themselves (cf. Challenge 2). The GoSL on its side has a responsibility to communicate clear demands to the international partners rather than continuing its current practice of keeping a straight face

in official discussions only to resist international demands in practice, e.g. by exceeding deadlines, or producing vague and elusive policy documents etc.

### **Challenge 5**

As the public debacles over the Joint Mechanism/P-TOMS have recently illustrated, the political atmosphere in Sri Lanka is marked by continued post-conflict 'ethnic' tensions and the unresolved negotiations of a sustainable peace. This implies that statements and actions by international agencies as well as government representatives may become part of the public debates regarding these issues, which risks serious delays in the implementation of reconstruction initiatives.

### **Recommendation 5**

It is important that all agencies involved in the reconstruction process become more explicitly aware of their public image and the impression they convey about themselves and their work. It is necessary to increase the amount of information accessible about the work of all agencies involved in post tsunami reconstruction and to deal substantively with any misconceptions that may have emerged.

The tense political atmosphere underlines the need for a committed and genuine communication of ongoing and planned activities to the Sri Lankan public (cf. Recommendation 2).

### **Challenge 6**

There is a glaring lack of distinction between tsunami affected people in terms of socio-economic standing, social networks, savings, etc. in most reconstruction interventions. It is rarely acknowledged that the affected people are not a homogenous mass, but that they have different requirements in every aspect of an intervention.

### **Recommendation 6**

In this context it is important to acknowledge that many of the tsunami affected people were already vulnerable and marginalised before the tsunami, due to socio-economic standing, caste etc. Their lack of voice and influence as a part of civil society may account for the slow progress in the reconstruction, and it is the responsibility of all agencies involved to insist on these people being heard and taken seriously. Conversely many of the people who were affected by the tsunami were not vulnerable or marginalized but were simply made so by the tsunami. They had high standards of living owned economic assets and had a generally high level of well being. While the destruction caused by the tsunami would impact on their social and economic conditions, they may also have access to savings, better networks and opportunities that would make their recovery process different from people who were vulnerable before the disaster. This distinction must also be taken into account when planning and providing assistance.

In order to assess these factors census statistics should be taken into consideration, e.g. on housing, economic, and occupational status prior to the tsunami.

Furthermore, it is recommended that humanitarian agencies prioritise an assessment of the capacities of affected people, in order to use their competences more actively in the reconstruction process and to avoid the pacification of affected people, particularly those living in IDP camps.

### **Challenge 7**

Current livelihood reconstruction initiatives seem to be based on either an overly simplified focus on fisheries and agriculture or on elusive schemes of micro-finance support that lack

guidelines and focus. There is a risk of re-educating beneficiaries to occupations with little or no future prospects.

**Recommendation 7**

Livelihood interventions need to be based on thorough considerations of market linkages and requirements, and take other 'sectors' such as infrastructure as well as psychosocial rehabilitation and youth training or education into consideration. It should look at providing entrepreneurship training, and business development skills. It should look to introduce new technologies and new forms of livelihoods in a manner that is compatible with and supported by existing more traditional livelihoods. It should be the aim of these interventions to take livelihoods further than prior to the tsunami (to "Build Back Better", even in terms of human capacities) by inspiring the creativity of local partners and beneficiaries to imagine alternative occupations that will enrich the Sri Lankan job market in the future. In this respect it should also consider the links between livelihood activities and other sectors addressing particularly the problematic false separation of infrastructure, shelter and even fisheries and agriculture from livelihoods.