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## Local perspectives on humanitarian aid in Sri Lanka after the tsunami

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**ABSTRACT**

Objectives: This case study examines the impact of humanitarian aid from the perspectives of local stakeholders in Sri Lanka following the tsunami disaster of December 2004.

Study Design: Qualitative study using key-informant and focus group interviews.

Methods: Key-informant and focus group interviews were conducted with tsunami survivors, community leaders, the local authorities and aid workers sampled purposively. Data collected was analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: The study found that aid had aggravated social tensions and the lack of community engagement led to grievances. There was a perceived lack of transparency, beneficiary expectations were not always met and it was difficult to match aid to needs. Rapid participatory approaches to obtain beneficiary feedback in post disaster settings are possible but have limitations due to respondent bias.

Conclusions: In order to mitigate adverse social impacts of their programmes, humanitarian aid agencies need to better understand the context in which aid is delivered. Beneficiary feedback is essential in disaster planning and response so that disaster response can be better matched to the needs of beneficiaries.

Keywords: Disaster; Tsunami; Community; Needs; Emergency; Relief.

## **INTRODUCTION**

On December 26, 2004, an earthquake off the coast of Sumatra, Indonesia generated a massive tsunami that devastated vast coastal areas across the Indian Ocean. In Sri Lanka, the tsunami caused 38,195 fatalities and rendered 834,000 people homeless.<sup>1-3</sup> In one eastern district alone, Ampara suffered more than 10,000 deaths and 193,000 persons displaced. Survivors faced severe shortages of shelter, sanitation and clean water, and there was widespread damage to the local infrastructure and coastal transport networks.<sup>4</sup> In the aftermath, the Sri Lankan Government, foreign governments, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and ordinary citizens worldwide mounted a vigorous aid response.<sup>5</sup>

Although humanitarian assistance is assumed to be beneficial, aid can have detrimental effects and many aid programmes are inadequately evaluated.<sup>6-9</sup> Evaluations conducted frequently have a donor or INGO bias where the achievement of targets and objectives take precedence.<sup>10,11</sup> These evaluations often lack sufficient beneficiary feedback due to operational constraints in emergency settings that favour top-down approaches.<sup>12,13</sup> As such, there is a need for greater beneficiary accountability by INGOs for both quality assurance and ethical reasons.<sup>10,14,15</sup>

Between 29 May and 9 July 2005, a qualitative survey using participatory approaches was carried out to explore the perceptions of local stakeholders, such as villagers, community leaders and aid workers, of the impact of humanitarian aid in Ampara district, Sri Lanka.

## **METHODS**

A Medline search was conducted for articles on the impact of aid, and evaluations of aid and disaster response programmes. The specialist journal *Disasters* was manually searched as well as back tracing of reference lists. Grey literature sources, such as humanitarian sector websites (ALNAP Tsunami Evaluation Coalition, ODI and ReliefWeb), and reports from the Sri Lankan National Disaster Management Centre were accessed. Operational information including internal reports and evaluations was provided by an INGO operating in Ampara. This gave contextual and programme information, which helped formulate interview topics and identify appropriate interviewees.

Local stakeholder feedback was collected through key-informant and focus group interviews. (Table 1) Sampling of participants was purposive with the intention of gathering a representative and broad range of perspectives. Participants included beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of aid, and vulnerable groups such as women, the elderly, and an ethnic minority group. Similarly, various key-informants were interviewed including aid-workers, local community and religious leaders, and representatives from the local authorities and fishing cooperatives.

**Table 1. Summary of Interviews Conducted**

| Unit of study                         | Description                        | Number of interviewees |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Focus Groups                          | Men's group 1                      | 3                      |
|                                       | Men's group 2                      | 4                      |
|                                       | Women's group                      | 6                      |
|                                       | Non- 'Tamil/Muslim' group          | 7                      |
|                                       | Local Mosque Trustee Board         | 8                      |
| Key Informants Interviews             | INGO Expatriate staff              | 8                      |
|                                       | INGO Local Staff                   | 3                      |
|                                       | Other NGOs                         | 3                      |
|                                       | Local Government Officials         | 2                      |
|                                       | Local Fishing Cooperatives         | 3                      |
| Opportunistic Unstructured Interviews | Non-beneficiaries                  | 7                      |
|                                       | Beneficiaries                      | 5                      |
|                                       | Other NGO                          | 1                      |
|                                       | Total number of people interviewed | 60                     |

Semi-structured questionnaires and interview topic guides were devised for the key-informant and group interviews respectively. Interviews covered what aid was distributed, how aid was distributed, 'positive' and 'negative' effects of aid, sustainability, beneficiary involvement and satisfaction with aid. Group interviews were held in communal areas deemed as 'neutral territory' by participants such as mosque halls. Interviews were recorded with the participants' consent for later translation and transcription, and subsequently analysed using thematic analysis. Themes from the interviews were identified and related back to similar themes in the published literature.

## **RESULTS**

### ***The effect of aid on pre-existing social divisions***

Ampara's population consists of Tamil Muslims and Sinhalese, and minority communities such as non-Muslim Tamils, and Malays. The various ethnic groups tend to cluster in separate communities along the coast. Agriculture and fishing were the main industries, but unemployment levels were high and 65% of the population lived below the poverty line. The district is claimed by the separatist Tamil Tiger movement and has endured two decades of conflict. Consequently, the communities are polarized with resources distributed along blood-ties, ethnic and caste differences with pre-existing tensions and suspicion.<sup>16</sup>

One recurrent theme was the impact of aid on these social tensions. As one community leader described, "there are two communities, Tamil and Muslim, and it might be dangerous for our lives to speak openly". Tensions were worsened by local practices of retribution and "people making [false] accusations". Post-tsunami, aid

appears to have aggravated tensions and created new divisions. For example, the community was arbitrarily divided into ‘*tsunami-affected*’ persons eligible for humanitarian aid, and ‘*non-tsunami-affected*’, who were ineligible. These distinctions seemed alien and inequitable to the community. Some humanitarian aid such as material aid to the fishing cooperatives, also inadvertently reinforced this inequity as it favoured young able-bodied men. This led to calls from community leaders for aid to be ‘community-based’ rather than allocated on an individual basis.

**Box 1. Quotes from interviews – Aid exacerbating divisions**

“Many beneficiaries received help but there are many poor people who have not received aid. Aid should be extended to help the non-tsunami people.”

*Local village headman*

“The people who were affected were not given [aid], but the people who were not affected were given. So there is a problem.”

*Local community leader*

“All are affected by the tsunami. The people say, ‘We didn’t get [aid], but [other people] were given!’ In that way, [the people] are disappointed.”

*Middle-aged Tamil man*

Despite attempts to ensure fair distribution of aid by INGOs, this was difficult to achieve and may have worsened local income inequalities. For example, many INGO transactions were with local businesses minimally affected by the disaster whilst many in the community remained unemployed. Aid recipients also ended up materially better off than non-recipients. The availability of substantial amounts of aid also spawned ‘*disaster entrepreneurs*’ who opportunistically attempted to manipulate the aid distribution system to obtain aid. As aid-workers observed, locals would conspire: “Today you will come representing me, tomorrow I will come representing you”. In some instances village leaders would inflate the number of survivors to boost aid allocation in their areas. Those who had control of access to resources stood to gain both financially and politically.<sup>11</sup>

Over time, resource competition for aid led to grievances increasingly directed at the INGOs. Aid workers were frequently harassed “to adjust” the entitlement criteria for aid, and occasionally even assaulted. Local tensions were thus heightened by both real and perceived inequities in the distribution of aid.

***Issues with community engagement***

Both INGO and community interviewees reported issues with community engagement. Initially, the arrival of INGOs was viewed positively and community relations had a marked ‘courtesy bias’. Beneficiary feedback was uncritical. Latterly, grievances surfaced following perceived irregularities in aid allocation. The community had no means of voicing their grievances due to language barriers and the lack of direct access to the INGOs. Unresolved grievances in turn soured relations and created problems for the local authorities and community leaders. One community leader complained, “The public was annoyed. They wanted to fight and argue and

make problems. I had to speak to them to try and solve this problem in a peaceful manner.”

After the disaster, many survivors were destitute and felt powerless and vulnerable (Box 2). The lack of community engagement in the implementation of aid programmes exacerbated such feelings. For example, a few respondents felt they could not leave their shelters for fear that vacant shelters would be dismantled and removed. This hampered them seeking employment or carrying out daily tasks such as bathing or fetching water.

**Box 2. Quotes from interviews – Powerlessness and loss of control**

“People are in a ‘panic’ situation. They are worried [that they won’t get aid]”  
*Local government official*

“We thought we could sell the land and move to another place and start a business there. But nobody will buy [the land] because of the tsunami. If we have money we can do something. We can open a shop and we can set up a poultry farm. But in this situation, we can’t do anything.”

“We can’t cope with this situation. What [the INGOs] have done is very needed. If they stop, there will be no more help in the future.”

“We had to accept what was given by them. We have no choice.”

“We are uneducated people. We just do what they say.”  
*Quotes from a few Tamil Muslim men*

Local authority engagement was also poor initially partly because many local authorities were not in a position to control the delivery of aid. Consequently, many NGOs operated freely and unchecked. This later created friction between agencies and local authorities who bemoaned their lack of input or control over relief activities. Between agencies, local coordination was also suboptimal as the different agencies had diverse intentions and capabilities, and there was inter-agency competition for work and therefore donor-funding. Coordination difficulties led to duplication of aid in certain areas and gaps in others. It also left the community confused as to who was providing what aid to whom and where.

Although community engagement was patchy initially, some INGOs did attempt to involve stakeholders much more actively. Efforts were made to be more responsive to local needs, to engage the community, address grievances and to coordinate with the local authorities and other NGOs.<sup>17</sup> Despite these efforts, the communities still did not feel involved and there were continued criticisms over the lack of engagement. Unrealistic expectations of INGOs by beneficiaries did not help either. For example, in addition to emergency relief, some expected INGOs to recompense them for material losses.

More significantly, communication difficulties between INGOs and the community contributed to a perceived lack of transparency. Many beneficiaries felt inadequately aware of their entitlements or the procedures for obtaining aid. Formal written criteria were often unavailable and unsuccessful applicants reported that they were not told the reasons why they had failed to secure aid. This led to misunderstandings and discontent, fuelling rumours and allegations that were often not helped by inaccurate local media reporting of INGO programme activities.

***Unmet needs and unfulfilled expectations***

Another commonly raised theme was that of unmet needs and expectations. The initial aid provided aimed to address the immediate needs of the beneficiaries, notably for shelter, clean water and sanitation. Whilst the INGOs sought to provide for what were deemed as essential needs in an equitable manner, this did not always match the community's perception of what they needed. For example, the provision of sanitation and health promotion was considered essential by the INGOs. However, pre-tsunami only half of the households had latrines, and local hygiene practices tended to be good. These relief activities were therefore not felt to be a priority by the local community.

Some needs of vulnerable groups, such as widows and women-headed households, were also overlooked. In a male-dominated society where jobs were scarce, it was difficult for women to earn a living. The study also uncovered significant unmet psycho-social needs of survivors, many of whom suffer post-traumatic stress-related symptoms such as anxiety attacks, flashbacks and somatic symptoms (Box 3). Whilst most survivors have attempted to resume some semblance of normal routines, others have not been able to do so. These unmet needs adversely affected beneficiary satisfaction with the relief process.

**Box 3. Quotes from interviews – Survivors distress post-disaster**

“This area is vulnerable for any attack (tsunami). There is no way to escape. The past unpleasant experience often comes to my mind. I can't live here. We spend the day here. When night falls, we spend the night somewhere else to sleep’.

*A local fisherman who survived the tsunami*

“We get the fear very often. Sometimes when we get the fear, we leave our things and run. When the wind is strong, we fear it is the tsunami. One day it rained heavily. We got the fear and we ran away...”

“The ladies get together and console each other. We talk to each other. We pray five times and ask our God to give us relief and save the people.”

“The children ask, ‘Will the sea invade again?’ The children tell us, ‘You should not go anywhere, the sea will come again!’”

*Quotes from Tamil Muslim women*



## **DISCUSSION**

### ***The impact of aid in context***

Humanitarian programmes are not implemented in isolation but exist in a social arena where context, policy and actors are all interconnected.<sup>15,20</sup> In Ampara, aid was not a prominent issue of pre-tsunami times but it gained significance in the aftermath. The presence and activities of NGOs in the area was highly visible, and the lives of many beneficiaries were intricately tied in with the process of obtaining aid. This affected pre-existing tensions and brought to surface regressive coping mechanisms in the local communities. Top-down delivery mechanisms reinforce dependence on aid and do little to encourage self-sufficiency.

The perceptions of aid also vary between the different actors and are influenced by the complexities of the circumstances in which aid is delivered.<sup>10</sup> For example, the reliance on INGO delivery of aid post-tsunami, though welcome initially, could be in time seen as a negative phenomenon by the local authorities as it undermines the public's confidence in the government.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, from the community's perspective, aid is not always appreciated as it may not meet perceived needs.

An understanding of the local context into which aid is delivered may have mitigated these adverse social impacts. This growing awareness that aid can have unintended adverse consequences has led to calls for greater accountability by humanitarian agencies.<sup>10,14,18,19</sup> However, this pursuit of 'accountability' is not straightforward. Traditionally, accountability has been internal or to their donors, and beneficiaries have lacked effective means to bring INGOs to account.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Community engagement in disaster settings***

In recent years, community engagement in disaster settings has gained increasing credence. Community participation can reveal problems with programmes, imbue sustainability and help ensure that aid fits in with local coping strategies.<sup>10</sup> It is also a means whereby agencies can demonstrate their respect for the beneficiaries.<sup>15</sup> Programmes that do not involve beneficiaries meaningfully may discourage active and sustainable participation later on.<sup>22</sup> However, as in Ampara, community participation is difficult to implement and maintain especially in post-disaster areas where numerous operational and political constraints exist.

There are also issues on how the community should be engaged and to what extent they are involved. INGOs and the community will have differing views as to what constitutes '*participation*'. In emergency settings, beneficiary participation tends to be limited to consultation on needs only and on terms dictated by the INGOs.<sup>22, 23</sup> Unsurprisingly, beneficiaries often feel disengaged despite efforts by agencies to accommodate them in programme planning and implementation.<sup>22</sup>

Another consideration is the choice of participants. INGOs usually consult and rely on local authorities and community leaders who in some cases lack the support of the populace they serve.<sup>24</sup> Subsequent consultations with beneficiaries may lack visibility or have been conducted with individuals unrepresentative of the community. It is also important to consider how culturally appropriate participation is. A recent study found that "ideas about participation are perceived by many in Sri Lanka as counter-cultural

with very few civilians being accustomed to exercising choice, or involvement in decision-making.”<sup>22</sup>

In the post-tsunami ‘emergency phase’, ‘top-down’ approaches to aid delivery could be justified as “the emotional and psychological consequences are profound and households forced to secure their livelihood in the context of severely depleted resources and labour-power are unlikely to have much time for meetings, workshops and other project activities”.<sup>22</sup> However, local community and civic structures in Ampara were mostly intact and could have been involved early on. Early involvement would have enabled programmes to be more sensitive to the needs of the community.<sup>12,21</sup> As the situation rapidly evolved from the ‘emergency phase’ to the ‘post-emergency phase’, the use of ‘bottom-up’ developmental approaches was more appropriate.<sup>13</sup> Managing this transition is not simple and does require a significant change in how programmes are planned and implemented.

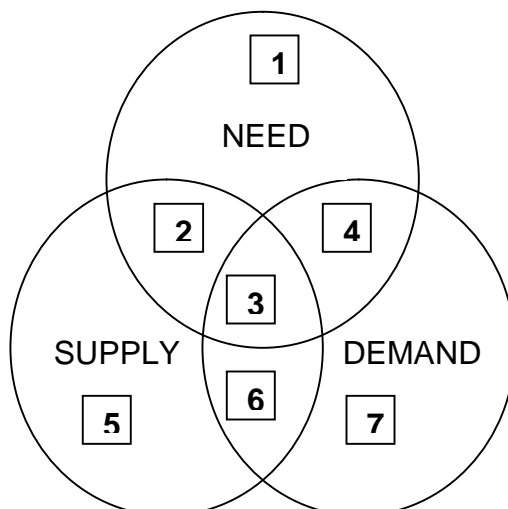
Good working relationships between the various actors are an essential ingredient for effective programmes. However, relationships can be adversarial in nature and compromised by inter-agency competition.<sup>24,25</sup> Neither is the relationship between NGOs and the communities always easy. Community engagement can involve a tug-of-war over the control of aid. The handling of grievances is also often problematic. Failure to resolve grievances damage community relations, builds up tensions and creates future problems for the INGO. Effective mechanisms for addressing grievances and settling disputes need to be devised and implemented.

### **Matching aid to needs**

Matching aid to need is complex (Figure 1) and there is an “inherent tension between prescriptive policies and mandates and the expectations of affected populations that agencies will respond to their perceived needs”.<sup>22,26</sup> The donor or NGO perception of needs may be at odds with what the beneficiaries themselves demand or require. Consequently, aid delivered may not meet the real needs of survivors. Providing aid that is unnecessary is inefficient, whilst ignoring beneficiary demands may fail to meet real needs. This raises further dilemmas: What constitutes real needs? Whose needs take precedence? And how can multiple needs be prioritized and catered for?

**Figure 1. Relation between survival needs of survivors, expressed needs (demand) and aid provided (supply) by INGOs.**

*Adapted from Wright, J et.al. (1998)*



### **Examples:**

1. Psychosocial needs
2. Well rehabilitation
3. Shelters
4. Microfinance
5. Health promotion campaign
6. Privacy walls around wells
7. Sewing machines

The issue of how psychosocial needs of survivors are dealt with is especially illustrative of the difficulties encountered when trying to match aid to needs. There is ongoing debate on how best to respond to the psychosocial needs of disaster survivors.<sup>27</sup> There are many practical considerations such as the lack of skilled staff, resources, or simply of political will. However, often the biggest challenge is trying to change “entrenched perspectives and practices of international agencies and donors”.<sup>28</sup>

### ***The limitations of beneficiary feedback***

This study shows that rapid participatory approaches can be used to obtain beneficiary feedback in post-disaster settings to guide programme planning. However, some limitations were also encountered. Beneficiaries tended to be highly critical of the INGOs despite their best efforts in difficult circumstances. One possibility is that positive impacts of aid were overlooked by dissatisfied beneficiaries whose expectations were not met. This suggests a potential flaw of participative approaches; just as traditional evaluations may be biased towards donor or INGO priorities, similarly, beneficiary feedback can give prejudiced views that are partial to the interests of the interviewee.

The evaluation of programmes using beneficiary feedback is further complicated by the ‘contaminating’ effects of other actors present locally. Within Ampara, aid was provided by several NGOs, UN agencies as well as the government. This made it difficult to separate out the ‘effects’ of aid and to attribute them to individual agencies. Similarly, the community was often unable to distinguish who had provided what aid.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Currently, many relief programmes overlook the ramifications of their actions that may extend beyond what is measured in project log-frames. The humanitarian aid sector is a maturing field that needs to foster an evaluative culture as part of organizational learning. Impact assessments are essential but not straightforward due to the contextual-specificity of programmes and limited comparability of different programmes. Furthermore, disentangling the impacts of one programme from other programmes co-existing in a locality is difficult. Nonetheless, these assessments can help inform planning, decision-making and programme implementation, and provide a more integrative evaluation of a programme than process or output indicators.<sup>29</sup>

Beneficiaries are not passive receptacles of aid, but consist of multiple actors with differing interests and power relations. In the face of adversity, the community’s resilience manifests through local coping mechanisms based on its network of group-based and family ties.<sup>30</sup> This resilience can be jeopardized by the cumulative effects of the social upheaval caused by the disaster, chronic conflict, unemployment, material deprivation and adverse impacts of relief aid that alters the dynamics of social interaction between the various actors.<sup>31</sup> An understanding of the context in which aid is delivered is essential. Failure to do so risks exacerbating pre-existing tensions or creating new ones.

Beneficiary accountability requires meaningful community engagement, good handling of community relations, and sensitive matching of aid to perceived needs. Many relief programmes seek to restore the *status quo ante* but this may neither be appropriate or desired.<sup>24</sup> Matching the relief provided to the needs of a community is a challenge that is best facilitated through consultation with the stakeholders. Obtaining beneficiary feedback is therefore essential in disaster planning and response. However, these approaches may not be appropriate in all situations, and a judgement has to be made as to the timing and extent that participative approaches are applied. INGOs need to be wary of relying solely on beneficiary feedback which in itself may be biased.

Humanitarian aid in Ampara has had a mix of positive and unintended adverse effects. Unmet needs still remain, but it is unrealistic to expect that any agency can fulfil all the needs.<sup>32</sup> An awareness of the potential impacts of humanitarian aid is the first step in the mitigation of further ill-effects. ■

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