Briefing Paper

Taking stock of the Tsunami recovery process in Sri Lanka: 2004 – 2014

Promoting positive action towards disaster risk reduction and advising future recovery policies and practices when communities face the aftermath of a major disaster

A conference taking stock of the Tsunami recovery in Sri Lanka was held in Colombo in December 2014 to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the unprecedented disaster. A number of papers dealing with diverse aspects of the disaster and its aftermath were presented, followed by a panel discussion that examined the policy implications of research findings presented by various authors and the discussions that followed. While some of the papers looked at broader issues of disaster risk reduction, others embodied analyses of data collected through recent field research in different parts of the country affected by the Tsunami. This brief policy statement is based on the deliberations throughout the conference involving researchers, public officials and other participants.

Indian Ocean Tsunami and its aftermath:

The 2004 IOC has been the biggest natural disaster to strike Sri Lanka throughout its recorded history. The scale of the damage in human and physical terms has been well documented. Given its sheer scale, the effort required to manage its aftermath in terms of relief, recovery, reconstruction, resettlement and rehabilitation has naturally been unprecedented. The state and non-state agencies, both national and international, made an immense contribution to restore communities in the affected regions. One could naturally expect certain gaps and shortcomings in the overall process of recovery. The purpose of the conference was to identify the achievements and persisting issues, and highlight the key lessons learned and the recommendations that can be made to improve disaster preparedness and recovery processes in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

An examination of the developments in Tsunami affected areas over the last ten years reveals a great deal about the recovery process in terms of the experiences of different population groups affected by the disaster. As is evident, their experiences have varied widely, mediated by a whole range of circumstances, both personal and structural. So, what one observes in different communities across and within the regions is considerable diversity in terms of the nature and extent of recovery. This is true with respect to personal well-being, livelihoods, access to services, physical and social infrastructure. It is by understanding the factors that have contributed to the above diversity that we would be able to avoid in the case of future disasters some of the glaring inequities that have emerged and persist in the case of the IOC in Sri Lanka, and perhaps in similar situations elsewhere.

Key points

The ten years following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami have given us an opportunity to document both the positive as well as the negative experiences in Sri Lanka.

The main factors influencing recovery outcomes in Sri Lanka can be catergorised as:

1. The nature and extent of settlement planning
2. The role of local institutions including local government
3. Socio-economic characteristics of victims
4. The role of donor agencies
5. Distance between the original and new settlement
6. Quality of construction
7. The nature and extent of social infrastructure
8. Beneficiary participation and community mobilisation

These experiences are useful not just for Sri Lanka but also for other countries that are likely to face similar disasters in the future.

They can also inform Sri Lanka's action plans to address the targets and priorities set out in the recently agreed Sendai Framework for Action on Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030.

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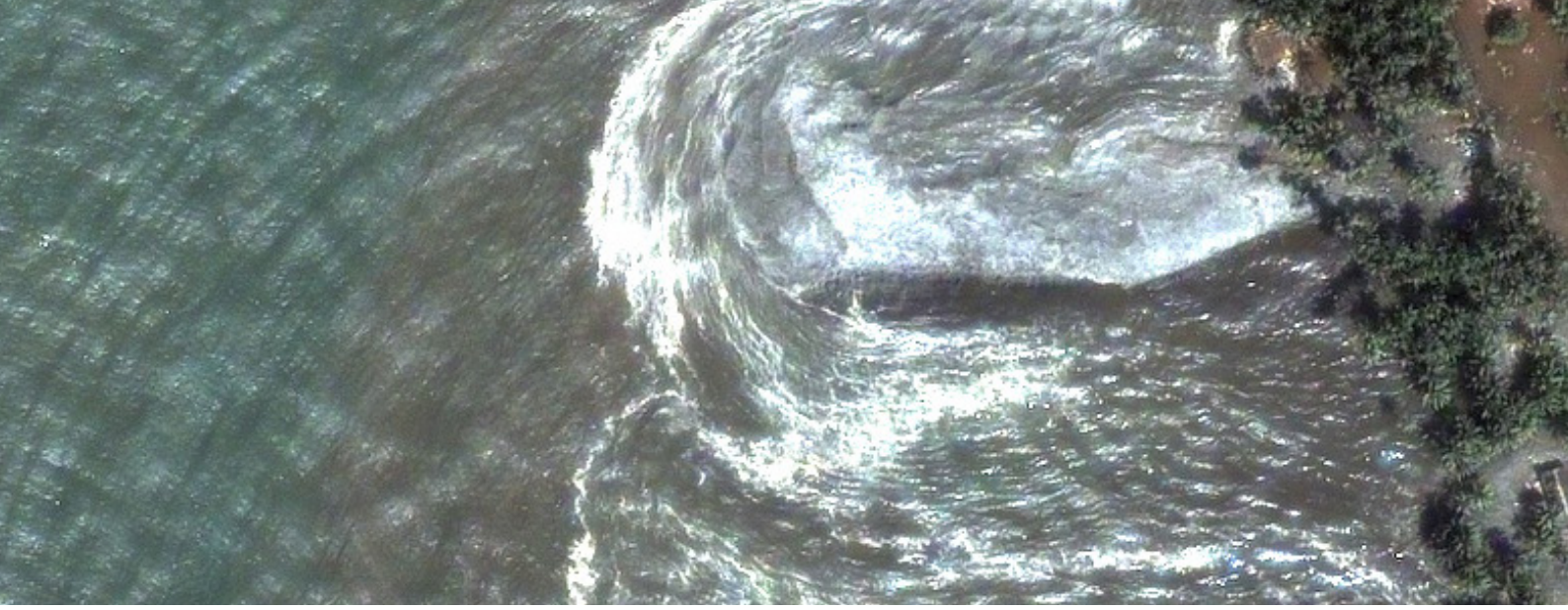

Sendai Framework for Action on Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030:

In 2005, the Hyogo Framework of Action (HFA) was agreed in Kobe. The HFA made a real difference in disaster governance. It highlighted social drivers of vulnerability and contained a governance model involving all stakeholders in disaster risk reduction. As a result, countries all over the world have established platforms composed of government, private sector and civil society to jointly plan and implement disaster risk reduction.

The successor to HFA, the new Sendai Framework for Action on Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, was adopted in March 2015 by 278 UN members states including Sri Lanka. In addition to social vulnerability, the Sendai framework pays ample attention to environmental aspects. There is a strong recognition that reconstruction of eco-systems and nature-based solutions are crucial in the protection against disaster. Disaster risk reduction, more than before, is seen as a policy concern that cuts across many sectors, including health and education.

The Sendai framework puts governments at the centre of disaster risk reduction. While Hyogo called for broad platforms, the spirit of Sendai is to call upon stakeholders to join the government in concerted efforts.

The framework includes seven global targets and sets out four priority areas for further action. The seven targets include substantially reducing global disaster mortality and the number of people affected by 2030, as well as to reduce direct disaster economic loss in relation to global gross domestic product. They also seek to substantially reduce disaster damage to critical infrastructure and disruption of basic services, and increase the number of countries with national and local disaster risk reduction strategies by 2020.

The four priorities for action focus on: a better understanding of risk; strengthened disaster risk governance; increased investment in DRR; and more effective disaster preparedness and embedding the 'build back better' principle into recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

A closer examination of the positive and negative experiences following the 2004 Tsunami can help to inform Sri Lanka's action plans to address the targets and priorities set out in the new framework, and thereby contribute to a safer Sri Lanka.

The main factors influencing recovery outcomes:

Recovery outcomes have varied widely both within and across communities and regions. These differences have been due to the influence of a range of factors. For convenience of analysis, they can be categorised as follows:

1. The nature and extent of settlement planning
2. The role of local institutions including local government
3. Socio-economic characteristics of victims
4. The role of donor agencies
5. Distance between the original and new settlement
6. Quality of construction
7. The nature and extent of social infrastructure
8. Beneficiary participation and community mobilisation

Each one of the above factors can be discussed at length but, for want of space, only a brief explanation is offered here.

Given the sheer scale of displacement caused by the disaster, the task of resettlement involved was massive and required an enormous amount of resources such as land, human resources and finance. As entire settlements had to be evacuated and relocated, settlement planning became a major challenge. As is evident, not many new settlements have conformed to high standards of settlement planning.

While many local and international donors have been involved in the resettlement process, most of them eventually withdrew from the affected areas after the displaced people were resettled. However, the responsibility of providing maintenance services has not been transferred to local institutions leading to the neglect of both physical and social infrastructure in the new settlements. This has created many problems in new settlements.

As one would expect, people who were affected by the Tsunami hailed from diverse backgrounds and did not have the same coping capacities. This situation required the agencies to pay attention to specific needs of individuals and families. In most cases, this was not done and, as result, particular needs of victims were not taken into consideration in the resettlement and rehabilitation process.

Above: DigitalGlobe's Quickbird satellite captured an image of the devestation around Kalutara, Sri Lanka (top), on December 26, 2004, at 10:20 a.m. local time—about an hour after the first in the series of waves hit

The donor agencies involved in the resettlement and rehabilitation process were diverse and brought with them their own ideas regarding their interventions. They also had different capacities, values, ideas and styles. While some were in a hurry to do their work and leave, others brought a longer term interest. These diversities have had an impact on their interventions leading to different outcomes for the beneficiaries.

The imposition of a buffer zone by the government immediately following the Tsunami prevented people from settling down in many of the original coastal settlements, making it mandatory for the new settlements to be established away from the coast. Since land could not be easily found in close proximity to the coast, some new settlements were established quite far from the coast. This naturally created many problems for some victims with respect to livelihoods, access to social infrastructure, etc.

Quality of construction has been a major issue in many new settlements due to diverse circumstances such as the nature of the construction contractor, type of housing provided, quality control by technical personnel and the extent of community participation in the reconstruction process. Poor quality construction is a major issue that many settlers have to live with and they do not see any remedy to this problem.

Provision of social infrastructure such as health clinics, play grounds, community halls, skill training centers, roads, street lighting and children's parks has been the responsibility of both the donors as well as the government. In many settlements, such infrastructure is much to be desired. In some cases, not much in the way of social infrastructure facilities have been provided, while in some others, the facilities provided have not yet been maintained resulting in their almost total abandonment.

The lack of or inadequate community participation has been a major factor that has adversely affected the resettlement process. The lack of consultation with the beneficiaries has often resulted in many shortcomings in resettlement activities. Many beneficiaries have had to modify the houses and other facilities to suit their requirements as what was provided to them was not suitable. As mentioned before, some continue to live with the problems as they have no capacity to do the necessary improvements. On the other hand, many settlers remain unorganised, as they were not mobilised as part of the resettlement process.

The observations made above based on field investigations point to the need for the development and dissemination of more detailed guidelines for state and non-state agencies involved in disaster mitigation including resettlement and rehabilitation of disaster victims. Guidelines can also cover disaster risk reduction strategies including the minimisation of adverse impacts of disasters. In this regard, better and more effective early warning strategies, protection of natural ecosystems and harnessing of traditional knowledge systems are also critically important. These can be incorporated in existing and new training programs including university programs at a postgraduate level.

As regards to resettlement and rehabilitation, it is necessary to document and disseminate best practices so that they can be made use of in responding to future disasters and taking remedial action to deal with persisting issues in areas already affected by previous disasters like the 2004 IOC.

Excessive centralisation of disaster management can be counterproductive. There is a need to decentralise DRR activities and this could be best done by adopting a decentralised approach. While national policies and national institutions are important to facilitate overall coordination and guidance, local and regional government institutions need to be empowered and strengthened with knowledge, skills and resources. The direct involvement of local institutions throughout is critically important to ensure long term sustainability of interventions such as infrastructure development.

Ten years is a long period to take stock of the experiences following a major natural disaster. In this sense, ten years following the 2004 IOC gave us an opportunity to document both the positive as well as the negative experiences in Sri Lanka. These experiences are useful not just for Sri Lanka but also for other countries that are likely to face similar disasters in the future.

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