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Conflict Prevention through Post Conflict Housing Reconstruction: Good Practices and Lessons Learned

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[Abstract]

The concept of ‘DRR’ within natural and technological disasters context conform to the concept of ‘conflict prevention and peace building’ within conflicts or wars context. Similar to DRR measures within disaster context, it is important to study conflict prevention measures within conflicts or wars. This paper presents such measures within post conflict housing reconstruction. Literature identifies a number of implications of post conflict housing reconstruction contributes on development and peace building including economic development and poverty alleviation, gender equity and empowerment, integrating displaced communities, restoring security, trust and faith in future and legitimacy. An empirical study conducted in post conflict Sri Lanka identified the good practices and lessons learned in preventing conflicts and building peace within post conflict housing reconstruction. Study involved 37 in-depth interviews with policy makers, practitioners, beneficiaries and academics.

The approach to reconstruction of housing in the original places over relocation and traditional construction over pre-fabricated housing enhanced beneficiary satisfaction and occupancy. Low income and vulnerable people were prioritised in accessing housing assistance while beneficiaries’ livelihoods were enhanced through livelihood support packages and construction craftsmen training. These as well as the involvement of local labour and material developed the local economy. Furthermore, local construction materials and local labour involvement in housing reconstruction enhanced the community linkages. Participatory approach to construction promoted a sense of ownership towards housing while reducing the cost of construction. Nevertheless, low income families faced with difficulties in completing the construction, which hindered privacy and security. Also, female head households faced difficulties in contributing unskilled labour and constructing a habitable house with the grant provided. Therefore, suggestions were made to tailor the financial grant based on the special requirements of vulnerable families such as female head households.

Keywords: Conflict prevention, peace building, post conflict reconstruction, post conflict housing reconstruction, good practices, lessons learned, Sri Lanka

1 Introduction

Disasters are mainly classified into two groups as natural and man-made (UN/ISDR, 2002; Moe and Pathranarakul, 2006; Shaluf, 2007). Shaluf (2007) defines natural disasters as “catastrophic events resulting from natural causes such as floods, landslides, mudslides etc. over which man has no control”. Man-made disasters are events having an element of human intent, negligence and error or involving a system failure (Eshghi and Larson, 2008). According to Eshghi Larson (2008), man-made disasters take place due to technological failure or violent behaviour of humans.

Moe and Pathranarakul (2008) classify natural disasters as hydro-meteorological (floods and wave surges, storms, droughts and related disasters such as extreme temperatures and forest/scrub fires and landslides and avalanches); geographical (earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions); and biological (epidemics and insect infestations). Technological disasters include industrial accidents (chemical spills, collapses of industrial infrastructures, explosions, fires, gas leaks, poisoning and radiation); transport accidents air, rail, road or by means of water transport); and miscellaneous accidents collapses of domestic/non-industrial structures, explosions, fires) (Moe and Pathranarakul, 2006). Human violence comprises terrorism or wars (Eshghi Larson, 2008).

Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR), which is defined as “systematic development and application of policies, strategies and practices to minimise vulnerabilities and disaster risks throughout society, to avoid (prevention) or to limit (mitigation and preparedness) the adverse impacts of hazards, within the broad context of sustainable development (UN/ISDR, 2009)”, aims to curb disaster losses by addressing hazards and vulnerability of people. It can be argued that the concept of ‘DRR’ within natural and technological disasters context conform to the concept of ‘conflict prevention and peace building’ within conflicts or wars context. On this basis, the paper establishes how conflicts can be prevented through post conflict housing reconstruction. It discusses the principles of conflict prevention within post conflict housing reconstruction and draws good practices and lessons learned through an empirical study conducted in post conflict Sri Lanka. Since, 1983, the conflict resulted in a number of violent phases over 26 year period in Sri Lanka by causing an immense amount of damage. Therefore, Northern and Eastern Provinces, which had been the main battlefield of the conflict, left underdeveloped in comparison with areas the government had controlled. Many people have experienced multiple and protracted displacements during their lifetime due to the cycles of violence. Infrastructure and housing in most of the North and East had already been severely damaged by the war and reconstruction of conflict affected areas was identified as a major challenge in Sri Lanka. Therefore, the study was centred in Sri Lanka as the country provided a sound basis for this research.

It first discusses the implications of post conflict housing reconstruction for development and peace based on a comprehensive literature review followed by the research design. Paper then presents identified good practices and lessons learned in preventing conflicts and building peace within the context of post conflict housing reconstruction based on the findings of the empirical study.

2 Conflict prevention through post conflict housing reconstruction

Post conflict reconstruction plays an important role in development and peacekeeping (Aderlini and El-Bushra, 2004). Among the reconstruction interventions, post conflict housing reconstruction is of paramount importance (Barakath, 2003). Post conflict housing reconstruction contributes to development and peace building through the restoration of social and economic life of conflict affected people.

Housing reconstruction contributes to economic development and poverty alleviation. Minervini (2002), identifies housing reconstruction as a prerequisite for economic recovery after a complex emergency. It contributes to the immediate investment in the economy through the procurement of materials, labour, and other inputs required for construction (Kissick *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, housing

constitutes an important condition for the establishment of a productive everyday life for the affected people (Kreutner *et al.*, 2003). It enables rapid return of people to their home communities and the resumption of their livelihood and income generating activities including home based enterprises and agriculture (Barakath and Zyck, 2011).

Post conflict housing reconstruction also promotes gender equity and empowerment. As conflicts lead to change the gender roles through creation of high number of female headed households, it is acknowledged that they need to be given special consideration in post conflict interventions (Handrahan, 2004; Wanasundara, 2006). Accordingly, post conflict housing reconstruction can contribute to gender equity and empowerment through minimising the difficulties that the women face in accessing housing reconstruction assistance (Barakath and Zyck, 2011). Moreover, the greater flexibility in gender roles during conflicts has enabled women to undertake more active economic activities. Hence, it has highlighted the importance of using the capacities that women gained during the conflict in post conflict interventions (Wanasundara, 2006; Smet, 2009). Therefore, post conflict housing reconstruction promotes the participation of women in planning, designing and constructing homes (Ndinda, 2007). As Ndinda (2007) indicates, the participation of women in construction and their livelihood capacity can be enhanced through skills training during construction. According to Leest *et al.* (2010), identifying vulnerable groups and enabling their participation in the development process through capacity-building and empowerment initiatives promote inclusiveness, which is fundamental to peace building.

Moreover, rebuilding of communities is identified as one of the most important problems to be dealt with during reconstruction (Malpass, 2003). In recent years, the return and reintegration of IDPs and refugees is regarded as essential to peace processes in war torn societies (Stefansson, 2006). Similarly, Kibreab (2002) comments that in war affected societies a lasting peace is considered inconceivable without addressing the problem of reintegration of people displaced by war and insecurity. Homeless IDPs and returnees are in need of reconstructed housing. Hence the reintegration of displaced people with claims for housing reconstruction is crucial. Brun and Lund (2009) indicate that housing is used as a strategy to solve problems of internal displacement due to war. Barakath (2003) also asserts that post conflict housing reconstruction is a crucial incentive to reintegrate communities as part of the efforts towards peace.

As the living space increases the personal security of the affected people (Kreutner *et al.*, 2003), the loss of a home during conflict has the potential to be a critical psychological event for the affected people (Smit, 2006). Hence, the loss of a home constitutes not just a physical deprivation, but also a loss of dignity, identity and privacy (Barakath, 2003) and housing reconstruction after conflict helps to restore that dignity, identity and privacy among war affected people. Also, housing reconstruction supports the peace process through restoring the security, trust and faith in the future among conflict affected people and investors (Barakath *et al.*, 2004).

Housing reconstruction also has important implications for the legitimacy and stability of the state (Barakath and Zyck, 2011). In this way, the housing reconstruction enables communities to foster goodwill towards the governing institutions through providing sufficient, timely and transparent assistance.

3 Research design

As the subject area of this study is deficiently found in the literature, grounded theory method is chosen as the most appropriate research strategy, which can provide more insights into the phenomenon through the explanations based on the reality. Data was collected through 37 in-depth interviews conducted with policy makers, practitioners, academics and beneficiaries in Sri Lanka. While the beneficiaries were from the Northern and eastern provinces, work locations of policy makers, practitioners and academics were Western, Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka. The duration of the interviews was in the range of 45-120 minutes. Furthermore, interview data was verified through a documents review.

4 Findings and discussion

This section presents and discusses the good practices and lessons learned in conflict prevention within post conflict housing reconstruction in Sri Lanka.

Land ownership of many affected families contributed to the reconstruction of housing in the original places living.

“People are going to build their house on their own land, I mean where they lived before the conflict (Programme Officer)”.

While this approach to housing led to reduced amount of effort and level of investment compare to relocation programmes, it enhanced the beneficiary satisfaction as people are attached to their places of origin. Nevertheless, relocation was inevitable in some cases due to heavy mining and zoning. Traditional construction of housing over pre-fabricated housing also led to the satisfaction of people.

Since infrastructure and housing in most part of the North and East had been severely damaged by the war the need for housing and infrastructure reconstruction was identified as part of the sustainable return of displaced people. Despite the huge demand, provision for housing was limited and prioritised for vulnerable beneficiaries. Accordingly, low income families, women head families, widows and families with disabled and elderly were given priority in accessing housing reconstruction.

“...the, most vulnerable people, that is women headed families, widows, disabled people families, elderly people families those who have no support are prioritised (Programme Manager)”.

While this approach served vulnerable families, it also enhanced self-recovery of affected families.

“...emergency shelter support was given for most of the affected people, while it was lesser for temporary shelter, was even lesser for permanent shelter. During this time other people start building by their own money. So that encourages self-recovery (Senior Project Coordinator)”.

Furthermore, the awareness was raised among the affected families regarding the post conflict housing reconstruction programme including the beneficiary selection procedure, which enhanced the accountability of beneficiary selection procedure.

“They [agencies] held meeting when we were at welfare camps to raise our awareness about housing provision. We got to know much information through such meetings in getting houses (Beneficiary in the East).”

Economic recovery was supported through local material and labour involvement. Prioritisation and reconstruction of infrastructure enhanced the mobility of labour and material, local economic development, community linkages and beneficiary satisfaction.

“...they have a priority basis due to limited finance. First thing they try to do is the roads. Then Government wants to establish health care centres, schools, post offices, banks, GA offices and GS offices [civil administrative offices] (Construction Programme Officer)”.

“School facilities are sufficient. The health care facilities are also available either in Vakarai or Kadiraweli (Beneficiary in the East)”.

In addition, livelihood capacity was enhanced through providing livelihood support package and construction skills training. Through livelihood support package worth of SLR 35,000, animal husbandry was supported through providing animals while skill trades were supported through providing essential tools, Furthermore, fishing community was supported by providing boats and nets while small businesses were promoted through a cash grant. Construction skills training has attracted youth including women through promoting the training as a career development process.

“Now for instance construction industry is predominantly known to be not attractive to females. so when you try to promote construction craftsmen training and attract people, we depicted it as a career development process, not as becoming a mason... I have seen after this kind of massage there is lot of females join the training (Policy Maker)’.

Housing reconstruction was implemented through beneficiary participation, in which the beneficiary was required to mobilise labour and materials while providing unskilled labour support during construction. This reduced the cost of construction where limited pool of funds was available for housing.

“Financing is a big issue for a country like Sri Lanka. Therefore, it is important to take some help from beneficiaries...When beneficiary constructs, the cost reduces... (Project Manager)”.

Moreover, it enhanced the feeling of ownership towards housing, which leads to successful housing reconstruction.

“...It should be really appreciated the beneficiaries’ involvement during the construction. So that they will have the feeling of ownership (Academic)”.

In addition to the local materials and labour use, rehabilitation of rebel combatants also contributed to enhance community linkages. Equal housing assistance was provided through developed housing assistance guidelines in collaboration with agencies involved in housing reconstruction.

“...the agencies are very much concern to keep the uniformity among the agencies (Informant 25 – Housing Programme Coordinator)”.

Despite the efforts to prevent conflicts and enhance peace building through above strategies, the study identified some gaps, which are discussed below.

In spite the financial grant and livelihood assistance, some low income families faced with difficulties in completing the construction, as financial grant was provided to build a partly completed housing, which is habitable.

“We are happy with this house, but we do not have money to complete this. I have a small shop. It does not have enough income (Beneficiary in the North)”.

The lack of security and privacy associated with incomplete housing hindered the living of young women.

“It is more than enough if I could complete this house. My daughter is not living here. Because she cannot live here, there is no proper room for her (Beneficiary in the North - Widower)”.

While beneficiary participation brought the advantages of reduced cost and enhanced ownership towards housing, it created difficulties for vulnerable beneficiaries such as female heads.

“...May be, specially the widows, they do not have, support from their husbands. Then they are suffering as they are unable to complete the specified works within this limited amount (Programme Officer)”

As a result, these families faced difficulties in constructing a habitable house within the financial grant provided. Therefore, it was acknowledged the need for diversity in housing assistance.

“While everybody is treated almost equally you can treat different household in different ways because their requirements and their issues are different (Sociologist)”.

Importance of consulting beneficiaries at the design stage was highlighted as a way of incorporating diverse cultural and livelihood aspects into housing which was lacking in some cultures. Furthermore, it was identified some transparency gaps in appointing professionals, which need to address in order to enhance the legitimacy.

5 Conclusions

This paper discussed the good practices and lessons learned in preventing conflicts and building peace within the context of post conflict housing reconstruction based on an in-depth study conducted in post conflict Sri Lanka.

The study found that reconstruction of housing in the original places living through traditional construction enhanced beneficiary satisfaction and occupancy. Due to the limited finance available for housing reconstruction, housing assistance was limited for the beneficiaries selected based on the low income and vulnerability. Therefore, low income and vulnerable people were prioritised in accessing housing assistance. Beneficiaries' livelihoods were enhanced through livelihood support packages and construction craftsmen training, which consequently developed the local economy. Local economy also enhanced through the using local construction materials and employing local labour for housing reconstruction. This also enhanced the community linkages. Beneficiary participation in mobilising labour and materials while providing unskilled labour support promoted a sense of ownership towards housing while reducing the cost of construction. Efforts were also taken to provide an equal housing assistance for all beneficiaries.

Due to the limited finance, a grant was provided to construct a partially completed, yet habitable level housing. Accordingly, the beneficiaries were expected to complete the rest of construction by themselves while occupying the house being partially rebuilt. Nevertheless, low income families faced with difficulties in completing the construction, which hindered privacy and security. Furthermore, female head households faced difficulties in contributing unskilled labour and constructing a habitable house with the grant provided. Therefore, it was suggested the need for tailoring the financial grant based on the special requirements of vulnerable families such as female head households.

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