Sri Lanka after the tsunami: the challenges ahead

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The Sri Lankan government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international donors face enormous challenges ahead as they move to the recovery phase of their response to the tsunami disaster in Sri Lanka. Their programs must consider the delicate political situation in the northeast, reinforce the peace process, and ensure the development of all districts, without discriminating against one ethnic group or favoring another, but based on certain guiding principles that include community participation and empowerment, transparency, and conflict and gender sensitivity. Second, recovery work should reduce future vulnerabilities to natural hazards and lift millions of Sri Lankan men and women out of poverty, guided by international standards and best practice, with special attention to the needs of vulnerable groups, including single women. Third, a coordinated approach to rebuilding the Sri Lankan economy and the livelihoods of affected communities is crucial to preventing duplication or overlap in program work. Coordination is required at many levels: between the national government and donors; and among NGOs, the private sector, and local authorities. To ensure effective coordination at the local level, capacity would need to be built and maintained for the foreseeable future.

The tsunami of 26 December 2004 is the biggest natural catastrophe in Sri Lanka’s recorded history. It destroyed three quarters of the country’s coastal strip and severely affected 14 of its 24 administrative districts, especially the northeast region, where years of civil war had killed over 65,000 people and displaced many thousands more. A ceasefire that has been in place for the past two and a half years was enabling the rebuilding of damaged infrastructure, schools, and houses in the northeast region, but the tsunami has destroyed many of these assets, perpetuating the suffering of local communities in the region.

The scale of the human tragedy as a consequence of the tsunami is staggering: more than 31,000 people are dead and 15,000 are injured, according to the Sri Lankan government. More women and children died, as many men were away from their homes when the tsunami struck. Approximately 500,000 people are still displaced, of whom slightly more than half are being housed in relief camps. Over 120,000 houses have been damaged, of which more than 90,000 are completely destroyed. In addition, 312 schools are wholly or partially destroyed. More than 400,000 people have been put out of work, mostly in the fishing industry, the hotel and tourism sector, and the
informal economy, pushing unemployment from 9.2 per cent of the population to 20 per cent. Urgent action is needed to create more jobs and to rebuild livelihoods.

Of the countries that were struck by the tsunami, Sri Lanka’s economy has probably been the worst affected, and the country faces a massive reconstruction bill. The tragic loss of lives will damage local economies for the foreseeable future. In terms of property, 22,940 fishing boats have been lost or damaged, constituting more than 80% of the country’s fishing vessels, and 10 out of 12 fishery harbors, including ice plants and marketing centers, have been damaged. According to the Asian Development Bank, the number of people living in poverty in Sri Lanka this year could rise by a quarter of a million. This year’s economic growth is expected to be 4%, which is 1% less than the previous forecast. One cause for optimism is that Sri Lanka’s tourist industry, a major revenue-earner and employer, is getting back on its feet, as hotels re-open to host visitors to inland attractions that were unaffected by the tsunami. But given that ready-made clothes and textiles account for half of the country’s annual exports, Sri Lanka needs better terms from its trading partners, including India, for its exports of clothes and fabrics.

Delivering relief efficiently

The need for humanitarian relief in Sri Lanka has been enormous, and it is vital that it continues to be met in a timely, impartial, and even manner. Food, shelter, water and sanitation services, and other assistance must continue to be delivered to remote areas and communities that are difficult to access because of bad roads, which have been further damaged by monsoon rains. Non-government organizations (NGOs) are hopeful that disagreement between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) will not delay or obstruct the delivery of humanitarian aid. They are also hopeful that the post-tsunami relief and recovery work will help to strengthen the peace process in Sri Lanka.

In the aftermath of the tsunami disaster, and as a consequence of the unprecedented generosity of the world community, a great number of national and international NGOs are working to meet the immediate needs of affected communities. Concerns have been raised that some NGOs lack experience to use funds effectively, are unfamiliar with the local context, and are implementing programs that may be beyond their expertise. It is essential that the government of Sri Lanka provide guidelines to help improve the performance of NGOs and the quality of their programs, and also to empower local councils to monitor the work of NGOs. All NGOs should be striving to meet the quality standards of the internationally accepted Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response.

Good performance will also be driven by effectively consulting the tsunami’s survivors. Our experience from around the world, most recently in Darfur in Sudan, shows that asking people about what they need increases the quality of our own response. It was only by consulting women separately and creating the space for them to express their specific needs that we learned that we had to site latrines and washing facilities where they would be culturally acceptable and safe for women to use. Similarly in Sri Lanka, Oxfam has set up women’s committees and private areas for women in relief camps so that they feel safer and are able to express their needs without fear. In Sri Lanka, quality does not only mean providing the appropriate assistance. It also means ensuring that men and women are safe, they feel empowered, and are given genuine choices about their future.
Improving shelter assistance

Other crises in the past few years, including the earthquakes in Gujarat in India, and in Peru, have also shown that disaster victims are often provided with poor-quality shelter. Shelters of various types are being provided to people who have been made homeless in Sri Lanka. The government and NGOs have set up a large number of temporary housing projects to serve as shelter until permanent housing is found for people made homeless by the tsunami. Thousands of tents of all shapes and sizes have been set up among the ruins of coastal towns and villages. But the demand is so large that many people are still without shelter. Concerns have been raised about the quality of some of these temporary shelters: essential services and facilities are missing, they do not provide sufficient protection from the elements, nor do they protect the dignity, security, or privacy of their users. The government and NGOs should ensure that temporary housing projects are striving to meet with the Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response. A lesson that Oxfam has learned from other disaster situations is that shelter assistance can also maximize local livelihood opportunities through local sourcing of shelter materials and labor, and the participation of affected households.

Shelter is also being provided collectively, in temporary accommodation centers. However, local government authorities have been relocating displaced families from temporary accommodation centers, because many of these centers are schools where the new academic term has begun. In many cases such families have not been provided with adequate alternative accommodation. The central government needs to ensure that local government officials are consulting properly with families residing in temporary accommodation centers, keeping them fully informed about plans, and ensuring that their wishes are considered. If displaced people have to be moved, the relocation should be done according to the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, to guarantee their safety and dignity.

Moreover, relief should not be used as an excuse to relocate people from camps or from their houses without their consent. Local authorities should ensure that relocation from centers or other accommodation is voluntary: people should not be coerced in any way. It is not acceptable to secure compliance by suspending assistance.

The government has given orders to the police to ban construction and to prevent the reconstruction of previously existing buildings within 100 meters of the coastline, until a buffer-zone policy is put in place. There are growing concerns that the immediate ban and the proposal for a coastal buffer zone might damage the livelihoods of millions of people living on the coast, including fishing families who want easy access to the sea and to live close to their boats. There is the danger that an inflexible ‘one distance fits all’ rule will simply not be obeyed. Therefore, the government should ensure that coastal communities – in particular people who are likely to be affected by the proposal for a buffer zone – are consulted, and that an assessment of the impact on the coastal livelihoods of poor people is undertaken before such a plan is put into action.

People are also concerned that they will not be adequately compensated for the destruction, damage, or confiscation of their property. Many homeless people have either lost their title deeds or did not have deeds, even though they owned the land. UNHCR should help displaced people to obtain proper property documentation, to ensure that they will not be even more adversely affected than they are already.
Kick-starting livelihoods

The livelihood needs of people in the tsunami-affected coastal districts are immense, because of the enormous scale of unemployment and job losses as a result of the disaster. Employment opportunities need to be provided, which is why it is essential that job recovery and livelihood programs should begin at once, otherwise people will be reluctant to leave temporary accommodation centers or will be forced to migrate to the cities. UN organizations should coordinate their assessments of the impact of the tsunami on livelihoods, identify areas for immediate action, and share their findings with the wider aid community.

Ending violence against women

In recent weeks, there have been concerns that the safety and well being of women was not being adequately addressed in relief efforts. Female survivors of the tsunami, including children, have become more vulnerable to gender-based violence as a result of homelessness, lack of privacy, and loss of male family members. There have been reports of rape, physical abuse, and trafficking. Local authorities should ensure that women’s support groups are present and active in temporary accommodation centers, that the community is sensitised and mobilised to prevent violence, and that the police activate the Women’s and Children’s Desks for registering and investigating incidents of violence.

Making international trade fairer

Sri Lanka needs improved access to markets in the European Union, USA, and India to help it to rebuild its economy and to create jobs for people made unemployed by the tsunami disaster. The country’s clothing and fabric industry employs 15 per cent of its workforce and accounts for nearly half of its export earnings; but it could employ an even larger number of people, if Sri Lanka’s trading partners removed the trade barriers against its exports. The Wall Street Journal recently reported that in 2003 Sri Lanka paid $238 million in duties on garment exports to the USA which were worth $500 million. According to Sri Lankan trade analysts, only 40 per cent of Sri Lanka’s garment exports to the European Union are covered by preferential arrangement; a 12 per cent import duty is levied on the remainder, because of the EU’s stringent rules of origin, which require both yarn and fabric to be made in Sri Lanka if exports are to qualify for duty-free access. The European Union should substantially revise its rules of origin in order to improve Sri Lanka’s exports to European markets. India should also improve access to its markets for Sri Lankan garment exports, by reducing tariffs, expanding quotas, and revising its own rules-of-origin requirements. Similarly, the USA should lift its tariff on Sri Lankan garment exports, which currently averages 16.6 per cent. The Sri Lankan government should protect the rights of workers in the garment industry by ensuring that its labor legislation, consistent with international labor standards, is implemented and enforced.

Preparing for debt relief

Debt relief for Sri Lanka could release substantial funds for the massive reconstruction program that the government launched recently. Sri Lanka has multilateral debts totalling nearly $9 billion, and it also owes $3 billion to individual countries. The Paris Club has offered Sri Lanka a temporary moratorium on payments. However, given
that Sri Lanka, along with the Maldives, has been hardest hit in economic terms, and the country’s balance of payments deficit is $245 million, the members of the Paris Club should be prepared to cancel Sri Lanka’s remaining debt. If debt relief is granted to Sri Lanka, the national government should ensure that the funds released are deployed in a transparent manner, and the use of the funds is carefully monitored.

Mitigating future climate-related disasters

Considering that South Asia is perhaps the world’s most disaster-prone region, and that the human, social, and economic costs of climate-related disasters keep mounting, it is important to reduce people’s vulnerability to them. As experience in Bangladesh has shown, often it is the simple things that can save lives, such as building cyclone shelters, enforcing building codes, training local institutions in how to respond – and giving them the power to do so. The Sri Lankan government should, with support from the UN and other humanitarian agencies, give urgent attention to putting in place long-term measures to address disaster mitigation for the future. The G8 (the eight richest nations) should in turn support such efforts by funding them.

The response of Oxfam International

Oxfam and its local partner organizations are providing clean water, toilets, and other basic essentials for people in northeast and southern Sri Lanka who have lost everything. Oxfam has set up women’s committees, private areas for women in two relief camps, and also two preschool centers for children. Oxfam partners are providing trauma counselling, and also training and capital for income generating activities. Oxfam and its partners are hoping to meet the needs of 250,000 people by March 2005.