

From Research to Policy: The Case of Tsunami Rehabilitation in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to identify the policy implications of the findings of the comparative project on tsunami rehabilitation carried out in Sri Lanka and Aceh. It begins with a critique of the notion of ‘emergency’ that dominates humanitarian organisations. It also shows how managerial tools like Guiding Principles are no answer to the complex issues faced by projects. The last section points to a number of issues raised by the research studies: the importance of constantly questioning the theoretical and methodological models used by humanitarian aid organizations; the need for a better understanding of the nature of the state and its possible role in rehabilitation; the tragic consequences which result when social organization and land tenure patterns are ignored by aid organizations; that the repetition of the mantra of community participation does not ensure equity. It concludes with the argument that for policies and projects to be successful, implementors have to make use of the existing knowledge base and must employ people who have the competence and experience to work in these societies; the institutional structures of the agencies must also be flexible to deal with all kinds of social and political complexities which are unique to each country.

The research project on which this special issue of *Domains* is based, 'Post-tsunami reconstruction in contexts of war – a grassroots study of the geo-politics of humanitarian aid in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka and Aceh, Indonesia,' departed from the approach that dominated much of other studies on tsunami rehabilitation, in important ways. Firstly, it avoided the period of heightened interest in the tsunami, from 2005-2006, and sought to focus on longer term repercussions of rehabilitation. Secondly, it was based on eight, long-term field-level studies carried out in Sri Lanka and Indonesia. Both these factors created the possibility of a more in-depth look at the relationship between tsunami rehabilitation and the society that was at the receiving end of this aid.

This project, like many of the other studies carried out on tsunami rehabilitation was also interested in influencing policy debates. However, it adopted a novel strategy to achieve this objective. It sought to separate the research phase from that of generating ideas on policy implications. In other words, the researchers were given the space to carry out their tasks without being forced to come out with policy recommendations, at the end of their research. Most importantly, field studies were not policy driven but rather, each research study was built out of prior research knowledge and experience of the affected regions in which they were conducted, by researchers who had a long and committed scholarly and/or activist involvement in those regions. This strategy was adopted consciously because of the realisation that having policy compulsions right from the beginning might not only be a barrier to good research, but also would not produce good policy recommendations. This has often been the experience of research projects, unless they fall into the category of policy research. In the latter case, policy questions drive the research and policy recommendations are the primary objective of the research. My task in this project was to facilitate discussions about the intersections between research and policy and to tease out policy questions arising

from the research, in conjunction with the researchers as well as policy makers in both Sri Lanka and Aceh.

The objective of this paper is to present the key policy questions that arise from the findings of the case studies of the project. As mentioned above, this is a comparative research project covering a number of locations in Sri Lanka and Aceh province in Indonesia. However, in raising issues for policy debates, the focus of this paper is Sri Lanka. This does not mean the paper has ignored the findings of the Aceh component. The experiences in Aceh have been brought in for comparative purposes wherever relevant. Sometimes the Aceh findings are used to raise policy issues for Sri Lanka. It is hoped this strategy, while primarily focusing on Sri Lanka, will make some contribution to policy debates in Aceh as well.

The structure of the rest of the paper is as follows. The paper begins with a brief discussion on the links between research and policy. The main purpose is to clarify how this paper has approached this subject. The second section is an overall critique of the approach adopted by the bulk of tsunami rehabilitation projects in Sri Lanka. It covers a central policy instrument – Guiding Principles – which dominated the discussions within aid agencies. This is followed by the final section which focuses on some specific policy issues arising from research.

Links between Research and Policy-Making

Understanding the nature of the links between research and policy is an interesting area of work. There has been very little effort in Sri Lanka to explore how this process works. By and large the discussion centres on a blame game. When policy makers do not take notice of research findings, the usual reaction of the researchers is to blame the politicians or the

bureaucrats for not having the capacity to understand the research findings, or for ignoring them because of other reasons like partisan political interests. The policy makers usually argue that some of the research is irrelevant and does not generate knowledge necessary for policy making. In the case of politically contentious issues, researchers and policy makers often find themselves on opposing sides. Policy makers also find little time or inclination to digest research findings.

Those who have shown an interest in the issue conceptualise the link between research and policy as a linear process in which ‘a set of research findings is shifted from the ‘research sphere’ over to the ‘policy sphere’, and then has some impact on policy-makers’ decisions’.¹ This linear model is based on several assumptions: “First, the assumption that research influences policy in a one-way process (the linear model); second the assumption that there is a clear divide between researchers and policy makers (the two communities model); and third, the assumption that production of knowledge is confined to a set of specific findings (the positivist model).”²

The linear view of the links between research and policy has given rise to many activities. A dominant one is to focus on various means of communication. The question of links between research and policy has been reduced to one of communication and various strategies that are adopted to communicate the findings to the relevant policy makers.

Links between research and policy is much more chaotic and messy than implied by this model. The complexity of these links creates many entry points and strategies to influence policy. For example, research institutes influence policy through monitoring exercises,

¹ Overseas Development Institute, Research and Policy in Development, “The RAPID Framework,” accessed at http://www.odi.org.uk/Rapid/Tools/Toolkits/RAPID_Framework.html.

² *Ibid.*

judicial activism, campaigning, lobbying, etc., in addition to more traditional publications and disseminations. Some of these strategies need not be directed only at policy makers. It can focus on the media with the objective of creating public opinion. Research itself can have number of objectives. Sometimes it can simply provide more in-depth information to policymakers. Or it can provide specific recommendations on the implementation process or make recommendations for reforms to the organisation implementing specific projects. Finally, research can question some of the fundamental concepts that underlie policies.

The exercise undertaken in this project belongs to the last category. Every project undertaken by aid agencies, or implementers funded by aid agencies, operates on the basis of a set of fundamental ideas. These ideas reflect a particular conceptualisation of the problem that they want to tackle, how these agencies understand the society that they are working in and formulation of a set of ideas as the solution. Since these fundamental ideas have been in operation for quite some time, they have become elements of a shared discourse within these agencies. These ideas find institutional expressions in the way these agencies are organised. Often they have become second nature to these organisations and therefore rarely questioned. The ICES research project was interested in questioning some of these fundamentals and unravelling this shared discourse. Therefore, the goal of this project's findings was not to provide specific guidance for implementing projects on the ground or making policy recommendations. Rather, it sought to raise questions about the basic assumptions that underlie the conceptualization of projects and policies.

Finally, it is important to note that the policy discussion in this paper is addressed to donors and other implementing agencies that depend on donor funding. Therefore, whenever the term 'policy makers' is used in the text, what is meant is policy makers within aid agencies or

in implementing agencies that depend on foreign aid. This narrow focus allows for a more meaningful contribution within the limits of this project. In order to be successful, policy debates have to keep in mind the specificities of its audience. The manner in which policy debates are formulated and acted upon depends very much on the institutional framework within which these discussions take place. Each institutional framework sets limits within which policy questions are posed and acted upon. Often, it is important to understand the structure, logic, language, etc., of specific institutions in order to make useful policy recommendations. The methods used to convey messages will also depend on the specificity of organisations. For example, if the policy discussion is with the Sri Lankan state the type of research that needs to be done, the focus of research and strategies need to be adopted are quite different to when the conversation is with an aid agency. Taking these factors into account, this project decided to focus on aid agencies and implementing agencies closely associated with the former. Therefore this paper is addressed to them.

A Critique of the Overall Approach in Tsunami Rehabilitation

Responses to disasters by aid agencies are based on a particular understanding or an interpretation of the phenomenon.³ The dominant approach is to treat disasters as isolated ‘events’ rather than a process characterised by the interrelationship between a natural phenomenon and society. When a disaster is treated as an event, the focus is on restoring what was destroyed (infrastructure, livelihoods, etc.) and doing it as soon as possible. What dominates is a discourse of emergency and restoration of the conditions that existed before the event. Of course, to do this not only are funds necessary, but they have to be spent as soon as possible.

³ See E. L. Quarantelli ed., *What is a Disaster* (London/New York, Routledge, 1998) for a discussion on different theoretical approaches to disasters.

In contrast to this there is a set of ideas on how to respond to disasters that has largely been initiated by those who came from the field of development. This approach focuses on the relationship between the natural phenomenon and society. It is much more interested in the links between conditions that existed in society prior to the natural event and disaster. It argues that the impact of the disaster is mediated through the structures of society that existed prior to disaster, and therefore there is a need to understand these conditions in planning a successful disaster management programme.

In this literature, a differentiation is made between 'hazards' and 'disasters'. The term hazard is used to identify the natural phenomenon. When hazards mediate through society we have disasters. Therefore, the term disaster is reserved for the analysis of the interaction between natural phenomena and society.

In responding to disasters, the focus of the latter approach is both emergency restoration and long term mitigation. It does not ignore the emergency phase, but argues that even in the emergency phase the relationship between the natural phenomenon and society has to be taken into account. The fundamental objective is to improve the capacity of society to take care of disasters on a long term basis. This will involve many things other than construction.

A society-centred approach to disaster management will reveal that quite a few disasters in Sri Lanka are linked to land use and land ownership patterns. Most of the disasters in Sri Lanka are floods, droughts and associated phenomena like landslides. Many people who live and survive in locations such as low lying areas, non irrigated land and steep hilly areas suffer due to disasters. Many of these areas are unsuitable for human habitation. But some people are found in these locations due to the land ownership patterns of our society. For

many poor people, these areas, unsuitable for living, are the only option they have. In fact, in urban areas one can see how market forces have literally pushed the poor people closer to water. The greater the demand for land by capital, the more likely it is that those who do not have capital will be pushed towards water. Hence, the land use and land ownership patterns have a bearing on how a natural disaster mediates through social structures. Land use and land ownership is only one, but a very key, aspect for understanding disasters in Sri Lanka. This analysis can be expanded bringing in many other dimensions of society that existed prior to the moment when the natural phenomenon struck the society.

This focus is essential for understanding the impact of the tsunami as well, although the scale of the phenomenon was such that it had an impact on a larger section of society. Quite a lot of people who lived near the coastline were affected by the tsunami. But the impact, as well as the capacity to recover, depended on the social positions of people. For example, in the case of the fishing community, it is the poorer sections of the community who live close to the vulnerable locations. They usually fish making use of smaller boats in shallow waters. They have suffered significantly and they have difficulty in getting back on their feet. In some instances, the inflow of a large number of boats as tsunami assistance has made their conditions worse. There are now more fishing boats in shallow waters and lagoons competing for limited resources. Those who benefit from the surplus in fishing, such as fish *mudalalis*, or those who own multi-day boats that fish in the deep sea, might not even live right close to the sea. Even if they did, they would have had much more permanent and stronger houses that would have helped to minimise the effect of the tsunami.

If disasters are viewed in this manner, i.e., focusing on its linkages with societal conditions, disaster management gets closely linked with normal development issues. If we take its link

to land use and land ownership, disaster management steps can range from resettlement, improvements and introducing preventive measures for those who are forced to live in difficult areas, various forms of support to improve the coping mechanisms of the people, etc. In addition, since anything to do with alienation of land and land settlement in Sri Lanka has a direct link with conflict issues, the disaster management strategies have to take into account the link between land and conflict as well.

The bulk of what went on in Sri Lanka in the name of tsunami reconstruction was dominated by the more traditional 'event focused' and 'emergency mode' responses. In addition this was backed by an unprecedented amount of funds, charity mentality and dominance of a large number of international agencies who would be in Sri Lanka only for a short period, and would not be there to face some of the problems that this approach might create. In other words, issues like long term partners, which are essential for sustainability of development projects, did not seem to bother those who came for tsunami rehabilitation. Many of the problems in tsunami rehabilitation arose due to the dominance of these fundamental ideas in rehabilitation.

Politics of Guiding Principles

Once the relief and rehabilitation got under way the government, donors and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) agreed to a set of Guiding Principles. These Guiding Principles reflected a framework or a set of normative principles which the implementers believed would lead to a more desirable outcome of the rehabilitation process. In key documents that reviewed the progress of rehabilitation there was always a section

which assessed the ground situation in relation to the Guiding Principles. The Guiding Principles included some of the following⁴:

1. Equity. The allocations of domestic and international donors should be guided by the identified needs and local priorities. There should be no discrimination on the basis of political, religious, ethnic or gender considerations. The recovery process should strengthen the peace process and build confidence. The reconstruction process should be sensitive to the impact on neighbouring, but unaffected communities.
2. Subsidiarity. The reconstruction activity should be designed and implemented at the lowest competent tier of the government to enable locally appropriate solutions, engagement of sub-national structures, capacity building and strengthening the different levels of governance and civil society.
3. Consultation. To secure the mid and long term needs of the victims, consultation, local decision making and full participation in reconstruction activities is essential. Interventions should respect local religion, culture, structures and customs.
4. Communication and transparency. There needs to be adequate communication and transparency in decision making and implementation. This refers to policies, entitlements and procedures, as well as to resource use. All parties will adopt a policy of zero tolerance for corruption.
5. Reduce future vulnerabilities. Reconstruction should reduce future to natural hazards by adopting a multi-hazard risk approach.
6. Analysis of individual interventions. Interventions need to be assessed with their impact on prospects for peace and conflict, on gender, on the environment and on governance and human rights.
7. Debt relief. Revenues resulting from debt relief should demonstrably benefit the tsunami victims.
8. Co-ordination. Efforts need to be co-ordinated between all relevant stakeholders.

⁴ Information on these guidelines has been taken from the following three documents:
Georg Frerks and Bert Klem, "Tsunami Response in Sri Lanka," Conflict Research Unit, Clingendael Institute/Disaster Studies, Wageningen University, March 2005.
Joint report by the Government of Sri Lanka and Development Partners, "Post Tsunami Recovery and Reconstruction, Progress, Challenges, Way Forward" (December 2005); p. vii
Practical Action (ITDG), "Post-Tsunami Rehabilitation and Reconstruction: Compliance with Guiding Principles," Paper presented to the workshop 'Building back better-Are we on the right track?' held on 27th January 2006.

There are slight variations in the versions given in each of the documents and thus my summary of some of the key ideas is an amalgamation.

Many of the documents on the progress of implementation and the general thrust of the public debates suggest that there has been little compliance with these Guiding Principles. For example, a paper by an NGO presented to a workshop held in January 2006 to assess the progress of rehabilitation concluded that:

Over the past year of implementation, there has been no strict monitoring of adherence to these principles. Therefore direct evidence of compliance, or its absence, is not available. However, there are reliable indications that concerted action has been wanting in this respect. The documents listed below contain information that clearly points towards poor compliance with Guiding Principles.⁵

The paper goes on to cite six key documents that have documented the progress of tsunami rehabilitation.

Much of the debate within the aid agencies and implementers revolved around these guidelines in one way or another. It dominated the debate and therefore set the terms of the discussion. Some NGOs, depending on their interest, elaborated on some aspects of the Guiding Principles. For example, Transparency International came out with an elaboration on corruption.⁶

At first glance the Guiding Principles look very positive. They include several ideas that can contribute to more desirable outcomes in tsunami rehabilitation. However in order to understand what role these Guiding Principles played in the politics of tsunami rehabilitation, let us for a moment imagine what really has to happen if these principles were taken seriously by those who implemented projects on tsunami rehabilitation. If we take each element of the

⁵ "Post-Tsunami Rehabilitation and Reconstruction: Compliance with Guiding Principles," *op. cit.*

⁶ See, Transparency International Sri Lanka, *Preventing Corruption in Post-Tsunami Relief & Reconstruction Operations: Lessons and Implications for Sri Lanka*, A briefing note (Colombo: April 2005).

Guiding Principles one by one, this would have meant efforts in the following broad directions or at least some attempts in these directions:

- Equity – Interventions to undermine structures of power, institutions and practices that perpetuate discrimination
- Subsidiarity – Undermining the centralised state led by the President and taking action to strengthen sub-district units politically.
- Consultation – Setting up organisations of the victims themselves and involving them in planning.
- Communications and Transparency – Ensuring that victims or their organisations have the information and can act upon it.
- Reduce future vulnerability – Move way from a focus of restoring to what existed before the tsunami, to a long term strategy
- Analysis of the impact on conflict, gender and environment – Once again analysis and interventions on structures of power, institutions and practices that sustain the conflict, patriarchy and destroy the environment.
- Debt relief – Interventions at the level of the Finance Ministry
- Co-ordination – Sometimes this amounts to only sharing information. But co-ordination in terms of working on the basis of common plans and objectives demands that each agency ignores their own mandate and interest and joins together with others.

If the Guiding Principles are viewed in this manner, it is clear what is implied in them is a difficult political project. This political project has to tackle the centralised state, structures of power in society, organise the victims, ensure that they get information that they can act upon, have a long term view of disaster management and reform how aid agencies work. In short, it is difficult to expect any of the objectives set out in the Guiding Principles to be achieved without a serious political commitment to transforming existing structures of power. What happened was far, far away from this political project.

Then the question arises as to what does this type of exercise of establishing principles actually mean within the politics of the aid industry. The origin of these ideas can be traced back to two fields within the aid industry – development and governance. The Guiding Principles are a collection of ideas generated from these two fields that contribute towards the legitimisation of the activities of aid dependent agencies. They help these agencies to be politically correct.

However, the very process of translating these potentially radical ideas into principles, depoliticises them. What happens is that a set of ideas which are deeply political, and whose fulfilment demands a significant political intervention, get transferred into a set of principles which everybody round the table can agree on. In other words, the political content of what they mean has been ignored, and the politics of social transformation embedded in these ideas are converted into something else. Once these ideas are depoliticised through such exercises, instead of political engagement what we have are reports and discussions about compliance. This is followed by constant repetition of these slogans without the political content. In the end it gives the impression that these agencies are interested in fundamental reforms without actually having the political commitment to carry them out.

The pernicious effect of this type of exercise is much wider when these discourses begin to dominate the public debate. This is what happened during tsunami rehabilitation. Institutionalisation of these discourses, supported through funding, crowded out other types of critical thinking. Challenging them is a major task of critical research.

Research Findings Relevant for Policy Discussions

The rest of the paper focuses on some of the key findings of research that need to be considered by the implementers. In discussing these findings Guiding Principles, which was the principle management tool that tried to set a normative framework, will be referred to wherever relevant.

Avalanche of Goodwill – How to Manage it?

The tsunami created a global level response from a large number of sources. Probably what we saw was a new phenomenon of charity in a globalised world. A variety of transnational structures supported by a globalised media helped to bring about this globalised response.

On one hand, this is a reflection of a sense of goodwill. To this extent it had a positive side. But on the other side, it also brought in a plethora of agencies and individuals with very different worldviews and experiences into the recipient society. Many came without much of an understanding of the ground situation. Very soon, they began to face numerous difficulties and the blame was on the recipient society. Once they faced challenges due to the nature of the society that they were working in the instinct was to blame the victims who were ungrateful and had not created the proper conditions so that the funds that were so generously given could be utilised.

This contrasts sharply with the attitude of development projects. In development projects, there is a recognition that you are working in societies very different to those from where the funds originate. This recognition creates the need to understand the recipient society in all its

complications. These complications are seen as challenges, and overcoming these difficulties is an essential part of development. Therefore, the attitude of a good development practitioner is very different from those engaged in emergency humanitarian assistance.

There is no doubt that the massive influx of international organisations and individuals created a complex set of problems. Some of these issues are about the perceptions that this type of an influx creates in the host society. Others are related to more practical issues of effectiveness of interventions, accountability if these interventions go wrong.

The magic word that all donors dealing with this massive influx of aid resorted to was ‘co-ordination’. This was introduced as part of the Guiding Principles for implementation. But this is to reduce a serious political issue about interests of the agencies, how they are structured, to the language of management.⁷ Many of the agencies who undertook tsunami reconstruction have their mandates and hierarchical structures that link them to their headquarters, usually located in western capitals. Much of their planning goes on within these organisational structures. To shift these mandates in such a way so that they can have a common programme with a host of other agencies who have their own mandates and structures is almost impossible, unless decisions to do so are taken at the highest policy making level. Therefore the kind of co-ordination that Sri Lanka needed, which amounted to a situation where all actors worked within a framework that would have benefited Sri Lanka, was almost impossible to achieve.

The introduction of a notion of ‘co-ordination’ precluded any type of discussion about the internal workings of these organisations. Basically, it is assumed that there is no problem

⁷ For a very good critique of the notion of coordination in post-tsunami rehabilitation in Sri Lanka, see Jock Stirrat, “Competitive Humanitarianism: Relief and the Tsunami in Sri Lanka,” *Anthropology Today* 22, no. 5 (2006): 11-16.

with them and they need not change. What needs to happen is to ‘co-ordinate’ with other agencies, whose mandates also remain intact.

The negative impact of massive external interventions has been an issue that has been raised in many other situations - e.g. Rwanda, Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina - where there were significant interventions by external actors. But very little has happened to tackle the negative impact caused by the very presence of such a large number of agencies. Tsunami rehabilitation in Sri Lanka was one more case in this string of policy failures.

How to Deal with the State?

Findings in both locations – Aceh and Sri Lanka-- where research was carried out, shows the importance of understanding the nature of the state and its behaviour in planning interventions. Sometimes it is necessary to keep mentioning this issue because in an environment of liberal orthodoxy the state is always seen only as a problem. There seems to be little effort to understand the nature of the state in societies where donor-supported interventions are taking place. This question becomes even more difficult when both the character and the behaviour of states varies greatly in different countries. In short, states of the global South cannot be understood with a broad brush. In the history of these countries there are instances where disasters triggered fundamental structural changes. This possibility becomes even more viable in countries where there have been ongoing conflicts. The behaviour of the state is determined by many of these considerations.

The initial response of the Sri Lankan state towards tsunami rehabilitation was guided by the current orthodoxy of the state sector playing a minimal role of setting the overall framework,

while handing over the implementation to private actors. In other words, the Sri Lankan government pretty much privatised tsunami rehabilitation. The government set up what was called the Task Force for Rebuilding the Nation (TAFREN) which answered directly to the President. In keeping with the prevailing ideology, the members of the board of TAFREN came from the private sector. The private sector was also brought in to set up the implementation mechanisms of TAFREN. The highly centralised state of Sri Lanka, where the President enjoys so much power, cleared the way for these decisions.

In this privatisation process of tsunami rehabilitation International Non Governmental Organisations (INGOs), along with their local partners, became principle actors. In most instances state agencies only played a peripheral role by providing information. When the state came back into the picture the language of disaster management dominated,⁸ although many of the activities that constituted rehabilitation were normally carried out by line agencies or provincial councils.

The fact that Sri Lanka depended on external funding played a significant role for this particular behaviour of the state. The massive flow of funding had to be co-ordinated by centralised institutions. Its usage had to be organised according to the orthodoxy that prevailed. Implementation had to be privatised. Finally, since the funds were meant to be for recovery from a disaster, state institutions dealing with development was largely kept out. Thus, foreign funding was a dominant factor that determined the behaviour of the state.⁹

⁸ For an extended discussion on disaster management and disaster risk management, see Vivian Choi, in this issue.

⁹ A similar experience was had when the Sri Lankan state implemented the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Programme.

Subsequent developments showed the initial model, which lasted throughout 2005, the first year of tsunami rehabilitation, was very much an idea of President Kumaranatunge. As soon as the President changed after the December 2005 elections, the attitude towards a less interventionist role of the state changed. With the conversion of TAFREN into the Reconstruction and Development Agency (RADA), under President Rajapaksa, the state became more interventionist. However, the interventionist role was most pronounced at the central level. The President wanted a greater degree of control at the central level, while what happened in the periphery remained almost the same.

The behaviour of the Sri Lankan state had an impact on how the affected population perceived the responsiveness of the state. This is borne out by some of the surveys carried out among the tsunami survivors with regard to the responsiveness of different actors:

A significant difference between India and Sri Lanka in the tsunami relief effort was the role of government. In India, where the government played a critical role in coordinating the rescue and relief efforts, the affected families reported satisfaction with the visible and tireless district level administration who provided and co-ordinated relief. In fact the government was ranked as the number one provider by the affected people on all dimensions of relief services.¹⁰

The marked absence of state responsibility in the rehabilitation process in the case of Sri Lanka can create difficulties in the future. For example, many private actors have been responsible for building housing complexes. But who will be responsible for the maintenance of common amenities in these complexes in future? There is a long history of INGOs implementing various projects and vanishing from the scene, leaving the host country to face problems in the future. Usually development projects tackle this issue right from the start by undertaking these projects in partnership with local actors, usually the state. Once the project

¹⁰ Fritz Institute, *Lessons from tsunami: Top Line Findings* (Fritz Institute, 2005).

ends the partners are responsible for follow up work. Generally those engaged in emergency responses do not tackle these issues. The emergency nature of the response helps external agencies to ignore this type of problem. What really happened in the case of the tsunami was those who came for emergency assistance ended up implementing development projects. To complicate matters, the state played a minimal role in implementation. It is quite possible that this model will result in many problems in the future without anybody responsible to take care of them.

In the case of Aceh, the relationship with the Indonesian state was mediated by the conflict that prevailed. Before the tsunami, Aceh was a highly militarised province. The Indonesian state viewed this area primarily through the lens of tackling an insurgency through military means and maintaining the coherence of the Indonesian state. The tsunami and the peace process that followed forced the Indonesian state to rethink this behaviour. The Indonesian state responded positively to the demand for autonomy, but at the same time began to take measures that would maintain the cohesiveness of the Indonesian state.

The important policy issue that needs to be noted here is that a state's behaviour is extremely complex and often determined by internal political compulsions. Normally, agencies deal with this all important entity through managerial logic. Terms like capacity building, improving accountability, etc., are utilised for this purpose. Concepts in the Guiding Principles such as subsidiarity, consultation and transparency are no substitute for a serious analysis of the state and identifying what can and cannot be done with it. The real problem then is that there has been little effort made to look at the complexity surrounding the state. A much more nuanced understanding of the state can provide a better guidance to policy.

What is the Unit of Intervention or Planning?

At the initial stages of humanitarian intervention, the focus was on the people who suffered from the event. This ranged from individuals to entire villages. During the rehabilitation phase, especially when projects went into areas like construction of houses, the larger social unit became much more relevant. The interesting question is how implementers identified this social unit in their planning process.

Research in Aceh clearly shows the importance of this issue. Saiful Mahdi's study, for example, points out the importance of *gampong*, or the smallest unit of communities, both for facing difficulties that the tsunami brought about and for rebuilding.¹¹ According to these findings, the social capital associated with this unit has been critical for the resilience of those who suffered from the tsunami. The paper contrasts this unit with what is called *desa* or *keleuran*, which was brought about as a result of legislation originating from Jakarta. This unit does not have similar resonances in Aceh. Therefore *gampong* is the more appropriate unit for planning interventions.

The Sri Lankan equivalent of *desa* is the *grama niladhari* (GN) division, the lowest administrative unit. The official heading this unit is the *grama niladhari*. The term *niladhari* or 'official' denotes that he is part of the public administration. This unit was established in the mid fifties and by now has become an entrenched part of the public administrative system.¹² However, within a GN division or sometimes cutting across GN divisions, are other social units, popularly called villages.

¹¹ Saiful Mahdi, in this issue.

¹² For a further discussion on this administrative unit, see Pradeep Jeganathan, in this issue.

During tsunami rehabilitation of Sri Lanka the *grama niladhari* figured prominently as a source of information. He or she also entered into the picture during the selection of beneficiaries. But the GN division did not figure that much as a unit of planning. In fact, in the case of Sri Lanka there seems to have been very little discussion about the unit of planning. On the one hand, where the pure humanitarian logic dominated, being affected by the tsunami was enough to make that individual or household, the unit of planning. On the other hand, many thought using the word ‘community’ solved the problem. However, very rarely was this term ‘community’ given any sociological meaning or questions posed about its relevance for planning.¹³

What is interesting is that the Guiding Principles did not provide any opening to tackle these types of issues. However, these types of issues have been debated in Sri Lanka in the context of development projects. For example, during the resettlement of people in dry zone settlements like Gal Oya and Mahaweli, social units within which people lived before resettlement became an important issue for planning resettlement. There were even discussions about the importance of caste in Sri Lankan villages and the need to take this into account in future settlements. The important issue here is not whether we agree with these conclusions or not, but the fact that development interventions provided spaces for these types of debates which could go into detail about the nature of the society that one was dealing with. Unfortunately, the importation of concepts that donors repeat all over the world, as reflected in the Guiding Principles, not only precluded such debates but also prevented learning from past experiences of development planners in Sri Lanka.

¹³ For a critique of the notion of ‘community’ constructed by aid agencies, see Pradeep Jeganathan, in this issue.

How to Deal with Land Tenure Issues?

Tsunami rehabilitation soon became a large-scale housing project. Since houses have to build on land, projects had to deal with land tenure issues. This is not unusual for development projects. Development projects dealing with housing often have to tackle land tenure issues. In countries like Sri Lanka and Indonesia, the land tenure picture is not that simple. There can be several forms of it and it can change from area to area. In addition, one cannot determine the land tenure picture only by looking at legal documents. Field work is necessary. For example, the term 'hidden tenancies' is a common term in agrarian studies. This denotes a situation where the actually existing tenancy, that can be discerned by studying cultivation practices, is quite different from what appears on official documents.

Therefore it is no surprise that the issue of identifying land became a gigantic and complex question for those involved in housing projects. In Sri Lanka, it got even more complicated by the government's decision to implement a uniform buffer zone throughout the island.¹⁴ There is also evidence that the interest of capital, especially tourism, played a role in this decision.

This experience shows that land tenure issues are a central underlying factor of housing projects. Questions of land tenure are always accompanied by various types of struggles and conflicts. For development projects that focus on housing, this is nothing new. Understanding land tenure patterns in the locality where projects are implemented, taking steps to sort out land tenure issues and leaving enough time for all this is common in development projects. For humanitarian organisations whose aim is restoring what existed before as soon as

¹⁴ For a further discussion, albeit from different angles, of some of the consequences resulting from the institution of this buffer zone, see papers by Malathi de Alwis and Jennifer Hyndman, in this issue.

possible, these issues become a problem. They do not have time to look at the complexity of society. Societies are seen only through the event which brought them into the picture. Hence, land tenure becomes a problem that somebody else has to resolve. This approach, which treats disasters as an event isolated from social structures, is not only incapable of tackling these issues, but can leave behind many problems.

Land was one issue where tsunami rehabilitation could have been used to bring about structural reform. This was regarding people who either rented houses or illegally squatted on land. Due to land hunger in the densely populated coastal areas, there are settlements where people have occupied land illegally. These are mostly poor people who do not have capital to own land in these locations. It was possible to make use of rehabilitation projects to provide some respite to such communities.

However, what dominated in tsunami rehabilitation was the notion of non-discrimination as stated in the Guiding Principles. This means treating those who were affected equally. In other words, there was no space for positive discrimination on behalf of the poor. True, the problem of those who lived in rented houses came up. But it was resolved through providing some monetary relief, rather than finding a solution of a structural nature. There is very little specific knowledge about how the projects dealt with those who occupied land illegally.

The experience with the land issue, which was intimately linked to housing, raises a whole host of policy issues. Some of them have been dealt in development projects that have focused on housing. Hence there is a certain amount of knowledge out there that can be utilised. However, in order to benefit from this knowledge, rehabilitation programmes have to get away from the 'emergency mode' and preoccupation with restoring what existed before

as soon as possible. The usual counter argument in this regard is that these agencies are dealing with emergencies and cannot operate like development projects. But if we think for a moment and realise that housing projects are still going on, i.e. close to four years after the tsunami, what we are dealing with are really development projects and not emergency rehabilitation. Therefore lessons that have been learnt from development projects are valid.

How do you Generate an Adequate Knowledge Base of the Society in which you are Intervening?

The issues raised above such as how do we understand the nature of the state within which projects operate, what is the relevant social unit for intervention and complexities of land tenure, raises the general question of how to generate an adequate knowledge base for humanitarian interventions. Some of this knowledge which gives basic data about the extent of damage and number of victims has to be generated anew. It also has to be done as quickly as possible. This part of knowledge generation seems to have been carried out quite satisfactorily, both in Sri Lanka and Aceh.

Problems arise when we go into the rehabilitation phase. It is at this point that the type of issues that I have raised above come into play. It demands more in-depth understanding of society. At this stage there is no escape from the fact that projects have to make use of the existing knowledge base of societies and build on that wherever necessary. This has not been happening. Instead there is a dubious process of knowledge generation that can be questioned

at both theoretical and methodological levels.¹⁵ This has also been one of the major complaints of the research community.

It is from a more in-depth understanding of a society that principles that can guide rehabilitation programmes can be drawn. In contrast to repeating slogans that donor agencies market around the world, what is needed is an understanding of the specificities of the society where agencies are working. Humanitarian agencies and donor groups must get away from the temptation to use huge generalisations to understand the Global South. Concepts such as ‘Third World’ or ‘Failed States’ simply ignore complexities within these societies and are intellectually sloppy.

This brings me to the question about who should be responsible for generating such knowledge. At the very outset, let me state that this is not a question about those who are living in the Global South versus those who are outside. It is also not a question of white vs other colours. It is more a question of who is qualified and who has the experience.

In my own career of working as a consultant for numerous donor funded projects, for more than fifteen years, I have had very different experiences of the quality of external consultants that I have worked with. When I began my career, mostly in development projects, most of my colleagues were either people who had either done their post-graduate work or some other form of studies, in Sri Lanka. Some others had a development studies background or were grounded in area studies. Many of them were aware of scholarly and political debates in Sri Lanka and were familiar with the academic literature on Sri Lanka. Many of them had also

¹⁵ For a discussion of some of these theoretical and methodological problems with reference to knowledge-generating mechanisms such as ‘participatory rural appraisal’, see Malathi de Alwis, in this issue. For a discussion regarding projects focusing on gender issues and INGO responses to Islam, in Aceh, see Jacqueline Siapno, in this issue.

carried out field work in local languages. Their understanding of social science methodologies was also sound.

There is a striking difference between these early experiences of mine and more recent ones, especially after ‘conflict transformation’ became a buzz word among the donors. For example, it is not unusual to find consultants talking and writing about conflict without using the word politics. If in the early period there was space for taking into account histories, social structures and politics of the specific societies, in a situation like a civil war where this understanding is essential, there are many consultants who not only do not have this background, but also lack training even to pick it up. Let me make it clear here, I am not making a sweeping generalisation, but a specific comment about individual experts. This means I have also had the privilege of working with individuals who know the politics of this country or have the necessary training to pick it up quickly. The major point I want to make is that this experience is much rarer now than when I worked in development projects.

This personal digression was necessary to re-emphasise the point that was made earlier – how global blueprints are substituting for context-based knowledge. Many of the consultants who go round the world work with these global blueprints. Many projects also work within these blueprints. In such contexts, there is no effort made to generate context-specific knowledge or to make use of those who have an extensive expertise in the peoples and regions where these projects are being implemented. The result is bad projects as well as bad policy.

How to Tackle Established Structures of Power?

Tsunami rehabilitation has raised many issues about its implementation process. Many of these complaints are about equity issues. In short, there is the usual complaint about the benefits being captured by influential sections of society. The other side of the coin is some of the tsunami affected have been left out. Some of these complaints are merely based on perceptions. But others have validity.

These debates raise fundamental issues about the interactions between the flow of benefits and power structures in society. For those who would argue that disasters should be seen as an interaction between an event and society, the importance of this issue is self evident. Rather than engaging in endless debates or doing surveys to find whether these complaints are true or not, what we need to ask is whether project interventions have adequate tools to subvert power structures so that those who should benefit from the interventions actually get their due.

In trying to deal with these issues, two concepts dominate the current discussion – ‘community participation’ and the establishment of procedures for accountability. Both these ideas were reflected in the Guiding Principles. The first idea comes from development practice and the second from the discourse of good governance. However both might be ploys to ignore the central issue that needs to be looked at – the question of power structures. The notion of ‘community’ has been used for a long time to ignore the presence of caste, class, gender domination, ethnic discrimination, etc. Pradeep Jeganathan, in this issue, has critically examined the notion of ‘community’ constructed by aid agencies. Similarly, the notion of ‘good governance,’ addressed by Malathi de Alwis, in this issue, is

an attempt to develop a rule-based liberal democratic state. Once again, the issue of power struggles within the state are ignored. Many of the specific ideas that dominate project implementation can be traced to these concepts.

An interesting aspect demonstrated by studies undertaken in this project is the element of self organisation among the tsunami-affected when they faced injustice.¹⁶ This has taken various forms and occurred outside the development project structures. They made use of existing subaltern spaces in society for their protests and linked up with whoever was useful for their purposes; it could be political parties, religious institutions, media, etc. This is not participation of the community as dictated by projects, but instances of self organisation. They are authentic voices arising from perceived or real grievances.

Participatory discourses of donor supported projects not only stay far away from these expressions of the people, but try to substitute an alternative which they can control. Therefore, it is never able to satisfy the needs of the community. There have been many writings and many criticisms of participation in academic literature.¹⁷ But the very fact these ideas were repeated once again in the context of tsunami rehabilitation demonstrates how little aid policies have moved over the years.

Participation as practiced by donor supported projects hardly leads to challenging the structures of power that underlie inequity in the flow of foreign aid. Once again it is a discourse that undermines the political action which is needed to achieve objectives of equity. It is time that policy debates subject the discourse of participation to a radical critique.

¹⁶ See Malathi de Alwis and Eva-Lotta Hedman, in this issue.

¹⁷ For a discussion of this literature and various debates, see Malathi de Alwis, in this issue.

The Debate on Tsunami Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Conflict IDPs

In both Aceh and Sri Lanka, there was a discussion, among donors and project implementing organizations, on whether or not to include people affected by conflicts, in the tsunami assistance programmes. In both locations, pressure and in the case of Aceh, agitation, was necessary to make the voices of conflict IDPs heard.¹⁸ Fortunately, this issue was resolved to a certain extent. However, the very fact this type of lobbying and pressure was necessary to recognise the simple fact that ignoring people affected by conflicts would lead to more problems says a lot about the institutional logic of humanitarian agencies.

The Guiding Principles mention that the interventions need to be assessed for their impact on peace and conflict, gender, the environment, governance and human rights. Hence, conflict became one more thing in the laundry list that is taken round the world by donors. This is a formulation that never leads to any serious analysis of links between rehabilitation and the politics of peace.

A closer look at the behaviour of aid agencies demonstrates that what determines what they do is their institutional logic. Although there is an elaborate mechanism to legitimise the activities of aid agencies on the basis of benefits to the recipient society, impact of projects, and various conceptual frameworks, what actually determines behaviour is the institutional logic of the agencies.¹⁹ For example, if an agency identifies itself as a humanitarian organisation, receives funding to take care of those affected by a particular event, and has an internal logic to operate on this basis, this is what will prevail irrespective of how this approach will impact on the recipient society.

¹⁸ See Eva-Lotta Hedman, in this issue.

¹⁹ For a very useful contextualization and historicization of the institutional logic of Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), see Jennifer Hyndman, in this issue.

Many agencies will argue that this is a result of the specialisation of various agencies and this is necessary for them to be effective. But the problem arises when there is a contradiction between this specialisation of the organisation and resulting institutional logic and the demands of societies in which these agencies begin to operate. Although there have been discussions about adaptable organisational structures, and even building organisations based on chaos theory which is more suitable for dealing with complexities of societies, very little progress has been made on this front. In the complex world in which aid agencies work, such institutional adaptations are essential.