

**Best Practices and Lessons Learned:**  
**The Humanitarian Response in Post-Tsunami Sri Lanka**

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**Abstract**

*The examination of best practices and lessons learned from past humanitarian relief efforts in cases such as post-tsunami Sri Lanka, offer valuable insight for making improvements on the execution of future humanitarian aid efforts. Taken together, these examinations ultimately illustrate the need for agencies to understand the whole context in which a disaster is happening and work together, along with the affected individuals, to meet their needs while working from stages of immediate relief to long-term development.*

**(Key words: Sri Lanka, tsunami, humanitarian response)**

## **Overview:**

On December 26th, 2004 an undersea earthquake off the coast of Sumatra triggered a massive tsunami that immediately affected around 2 million people. In Sri Lanka alone, the estimate lies at around 35,000 dead or missing, 15,000 injured and 500,000 displaced (Stirrat 2006). The tsunami that affected Sri Lanka was different than most natural disasters that affect populations in a concentrated area. The tsunami mainly affected Sri Lanka's coastline in the form of 'ribbon destruction' rather than in a centralized way. There was little to no physical effect from the tsunami just a kilometer inland from the coast. Moreover, the damage that was done was often spotty, destroying one house but leaving the neighboring house intact (Stirrat 2006).

Prior to the tsunami, Sri Lanka had been experiencing decades of civil war and had seen multiple failed peace agreements between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The LTTE had de facto control of the Tamil minority North and civil strife was prevalent at the time of the tsunami. Because this disaster affected populations in a decentralized way and it was compounded by the prevalence of violence and preexisting civil strife, it was difficult for relief agencies to adequately deliver aid to the affected populations. This paper aims to evaluate and summarize the best practices and lessons learned from the humanitarian response in post-tsunami Sri Lanka.

## **BEST PRACTICES:**

Most aspects of the humanitarian response in post-tsunami Sri Lanka have both positives and negatives, and it is vital that we as humanitarians learn from both our mistakes and successes. This section highlights and evaluates by topic the best practices from the post-tsunami humanitarian response.

## **Media Coverage:**

The extensive media coverage immediately following the disaster contributed greatly to the outpouring of aid from around the globe. Dramatic media coverage encourages giving, and also encourages agencies to become involved in a certain disaster. While this does have its drawbacks, the comprehensive media coverage generated both funding and awareness. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) immediately established the National Disaster Management Centre (NDMC) website within 24 hours of the tsunami. This served as a

centralized and reliable source of information for the rest of the world to stay informed on the latest developments and statistics surrounding the disaster (UN 2006). This access to information contributed substantially to the global awareness of the disaster and served as a vital and integral part of the entire relief effort.

### **Compensation Grants:**

One of the lesser recognized aspects of the relief efforts in Sri Lanka were the compensation grants administered to affected individuals. Compensation grants were distributed in the form of money to compensate for losses incurred due to the tsunami. They were intended to be used on rebuilding housing and were given in tranches only guaranteed by structural inspection (Kennedy et al 2008). This was significant because it facilitated early permanent reconstruction, with some measure of technical soundness. While other efforts focused on temporary shelters and refugee camps, compensation grants encouraged permanent building and gave displaced individuals a sense of control amidst an environment of chaos. While there did exist drawbacks, namely bureaucratic processes hindering timely construction, the grant system encouraged the reconstruction of houses, which in turn re-stimulated the local economies.

### **Access to Potable Water:**

One of the greatest concerns for agencies during post-disaster situations is the spread of infectious disease and subsequent death from dehydration (Cuny and Hill 1999). Unlike most other post-disaster situations, potable water was easily accessible, thus waterborne illnesses/diarrhea weren't prevalent. This most likely prevented a serious spread of infectious disease like the Cholera outbreak in post-disaster Haiti in 2010. Lim recounts, "bottled water was the only available potable water source for the displaced people in the Hettigoda Camp of Hikkaduwa on January 1, 6 days after the tsunami. All other refugee camps not only received bottled water but also had a safe potable water tank facility or chlorinated waterworks provided through the help of international or government organizations" (Lim et al. 2005). The easy access to potable water for affected individuals significantly lowered the possible mortality rate and must be recognized as one of the defining best practices from the post-tsunami response.

### **Involvement of the Local Government & Civil Society:**

Like most post-disaster areas, the immediate response came from local individuals and to some degree the local government. According to the UN the armed forces, police and LTTE were deployed quickly and dealt effectively with the immediate needs of the populations

affected. At least in the immediate period after following the tsunami, the SL military, the LTTE and civil society spontaneously worked together to provide relief assistance in the LTTE controlled North. Also initially, local government heads in all affected districts held daily coordination meetings that aimed to assess the situation and communicate with other districts (UN 2006).

Initially, the government of Sri Lanka wanted to build barrack style apartment blocks for displaced persons, but changed their plan after considering the response from the affected individuals themselves. Instead of building post-disaster apartment blocks, the government “deemphasized barracks, instead ensuring that many people stayed on or near their original plots and provided private, secure shelters plus ongoing, provisional land security” (Kennedy et al 2008). This process of involving the actual affected populations and addressing their needs ultimately made the transition to development more timely and cost effective. Also, individuals would often use their shelter in “ways other than construction-related livelihoods. Many people used their shelter for storing job-related tools and materials for conducting business” (Kennedy et al 2008). Not only did rebuilding homes and communities (as opposed to temporary refugee camps) give people the basic need for shelter, it also allowed them to pursue livelihoods while simultaneously stimulating local economies.

### **LESSONS LEARNED:**

While best practices can teach us what aspects of the response worked well, lessons learned can teach us which aspects we can learn from to better address the felt needs of the affected populations. This section highlights and evaluates by topic the lesson learned from the post-tsunami humanitarian response.

#### **Competition & Coordination:**

One of the drawbacks of a large response from many different humanitarian organizations is that it creates inter-agency competition. In the case of Sri Lanka, high levels of competition between agencies actually hindered their humanitarian efforts. Stirrat states, “competition was not just a matter of getting rid of money but getting rid of it in the ‘right’ way which would fit with Western donors’ visions of what relief should be” (Stirrat 2006). Moreover, the rapid influx of different agencies created a somewhat chaotic environment, with different agencies claiming responsibility for certain successes. This inter-agency competition

ended up harming the very population they were trying to serve, by ineffectively allocating resources and neglecting to work together.

Another issue raised by the sheer number of responders was the prevalence of small NGOs with little experience. “Well-meaning amateurs could outflank the relatively slow dinosaurs of the relief world by undercutting standards – but in such a way as to appear more ‘effective’ than the larger, more well-established NGOs” (Stirrat 2006). In addition to creating competition, these small NGOs often lacked the experience necessary to deal with the magnitude of the disaster. An example of this is seen when looking at what is usually first requested by affected populations, the construction of initial shelters. Some small NGOs had a wealth of available cash but were severely lacking in expertise – instead of building temporary housing with long term development goals in mind, many smaller agencies were building disaster-vulnerable, unsafe temporary housing, without any consideration of transitional housing and much less development. Moreover, because no larger organizational body existed, these agencies were largely free to continue their efforts without coordination or consideration for transitioning to relief and ultimately development.

#### **Focusing on “Sexy” Areas of Need:**

Both the comprehensive media coverage of the relief efforts coupled with the competition presented by the great number of agencies involved contributed to unequal and inequitable aid distribution. Agencies desired donor support and recognition and thus sought to help those populations who were most highly visible. This included mostly aiding women, children and the elderly. This resulted in an overloading of resources on attractive relief efforts like food aid and health while neglecting key areas of need, like infrastructure rebuilding and general capacity building. While providing aid to attractive and popular affected populations is needed, more mundane areas of aid are also needed in order to make a real and lasting impact.

#### **Politicization of Aid:**

Perhaps the greatest and most costly lesson learned from the humanitarian response in post-tsunami Sri Lanka was the politicization of aid. Humanitarian assistance should not be viewed as a solution to prior conflicts nor should it be used as a tool of political power. Given the civil conflict already prevalent in Sri Lanka, “it was thought that the combined effects of the tsunami on military infrastructure as well as the presence of international forces bringing aid to the victims, would help prevent a return to war” (Kleinfeld 2007). However, this was far from

the truth and in many cases aid ultimately exacerbated the preexisting violence and civil strife. The distribution of aid became a power struggle between the LTTE and the government of Sri Lanka. Kleinfeld recounts, “The LTTE and the GoSL insisted on managing the distribution of relief in places and among populations claimed to be under their authority...both parties insisted on their right to govern areas requiring humanitarian assistance...Equally, both political actors sought to undermine their adversary’s ability to do so, deepening the political rift” (Kleinfeld 2006). In this way, aid that was intended to help the affected populations actually hurt them and further perpetuated civil strife and disunion. Another way in which aid was politicized was through the use of political heavyweights as pawns in a political game of control between the LTTE and the government of Sri Lanka. Supposedly, the government of Sri Lanka prevented the then UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, from visiting tsunami victims in the Tamil controlled North and parts of the East. Annan visited extensively in the Sinhalese-dominated South and East, but was prevented from visiting the LTTE controlled Mullaithivu District (Kleinfeld 2006). The Sri Lankan government feared that letting Annan visit LTTE controlled areas would acknowledge the LTTE as a legitimate force and as such neglected certain areas to be recognized by the UN.

### **Lack of Structural Capacity:**

The preexisting civil conflict coupled with the scale of the disaster proved to be too much for the government of Sri Lanka to handle. There simply was not enough capacity on the part of the government to deal with such a massive disaster. For instance, aid supplies were shipped from the capital in Colombo to some districts without distribution instructions at all (UN 2005). Moreover, immediately after the disaster, the Sri Lankan government did not actively manage the relief effort, and as such, personnel and resources entered the country freely and were not distributed fairly. In some cases inexperienced individuals came with ‘nails and cash’ (Fernando 2006) and proceeded to build independently of any relief agency. The lack of oversight contributed greatly to the construction of unsafe structures by well meaning individuals. Also, there was no adequate early warning system, nor was there the communication infrastructure to alert the population of an impending disaster.

The initial lack of a distribution and organizational system led the government of Sri Lanka to implement the Post-tsunami Operational Management Structure (or P-TOMS), a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE to

deliver aid. However, the P-TOMS was ultimately revoked by Mahinda Rajapakse, the ex Prime Minister turned President, who won on a mostly anti-P-TOMS platform. Not only was this a lack of structural capacity on the part of the government to effectively distribute aid, it became a hotly politicized issue with the P-TOMS being viewed as legitimizing the LTTE. Ultimately, the lack of a distribution system for the influx of humanitarian aid deepened the already existing violent political divide.

## **CONCLUSIONS:**

Both best practices and lessons learned can teach us as humanitarians valuable lessons for the future. In the case of post-tsunami Sri Lanka, best practices included: comprehensive and immediate media coverage encouraging awareness and response, compensation grants stimulating early permanent reconstruction, access to potable water preventing an outbreak of infectious disease, and the involvement of local government and civil society encouraging the progression from relief to development. These practices are ways in which humanitarian agencies can learn what works best from the experience in post-tsunami Sri Lanka. While best practices are important, perhaps even more important to note are lessons learned. Important lessons learned from Sri Lanka include: competition and lack of coordination hindering relief efforts, focusing on 'sexy' areas of need resulting in inequitable distribution, the politicization of aid substantially reducing its effectiveness and may do more harm than good, and structural capacity needing to be at a certain level to handle a disaster of such magnitude. Taken together, these practices and lessons ultimately illustrate the need for agencies to understand the whole context in which a disaster is happening and work together along with the affected individuals to meet their felt needs while working from stages of immediate relief to development.

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